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RIDER ON THE
MOUNTAINS

RIDER ON THE MOUNTAINS

Elisabeth Hubbard Lansing

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*This book is dedicated
to the Frontier Nursing Service,
in highest admiration.*

CHAPTER ONE

THE light at the intersection flicked green and the line of waiting cars surged forward. A truck near the curb roared ahead with the rest of the traffic, then screeched to a halt as a small, slender girl in a bright-red suit stepped from the pavement directly into its path.

The driver leaned from his seat and bellowed down at her, "Whatsa matter? Tired of living?"

The shout brought the girl up short and she looked up into the angry face. For a second she hesitated, as though awakened from a private dream into the reality of her near escape. She smiled then and nodded her thanks as she stepped back to the pavement. The smile seemed to mollify the driver and he looked at her more closely.

"Good-looking girls like you shouldn't have no worries," he said conversationally. "You oughta watch out."

Lexie Littleton nodded once more. Then, as the traffic light changed in her favor, she darted across Massachusetts Avenue and turned toward Symphony Hall. Worries! If even a truck driver noticed that she had something on her

mind, it was proof that this particular problem was getting out of hand. Lexie frowned and hugged her jacket closer. The penetrating cold of a Boston January was no comfort in her present state of mind. A bleak wind swept down Huntington Avenue, whistling about her slim ankles and very nearly freezing her feet in the small toeless slippers.

"I should have worn arctics the way Mother said," she murmured and scurried thankfully up the steps to the Hall. Aunt Em was always early, and Lexie knew she would be waiting in the lobby. Lexie had been going to the Friday afternoon series of concerts all winter with Aunt Em and she had never yet failed to keep her waiting.

For a moment Lexie did not see her aunt in the throng that moved sedately toward the inner doors. She nodded toward a group of her mother's friends and turned away as one of them seemed inclined to speak to her. Her movement caused a small stir of whispers in the group and Lexie sighed. The incident would be reported to her mother and she would get another lecture on The Necessity of Consideration for Older People. But she could worry about that later. Right now she had other more important things to bother her.

Lexie pushed her way toward one side of the lobby where she could watch for Aunt Em and be out of the way of the many people who might speak to her. When you had lived in Boston for nineteen years, you knew everyone, particularly those who attended the Friday afternoon series. She couldn't talk to anyone now; there was Mark Worthing to think about. What had happened to him lately? Six months ago in June he had told her that he loved

her and they had become engaged. Lexie remembered in vivid detail the plans and discussions of their future together. But in the last few weeks Mark had never once spoken of these plans and, worst of all, had never mentioned loving her. She had not changed; she felt about Mark as though he belonged to her. It seemed impossible that the few months at the medical school could make such a different person of him.

There was a mirror in the door beside her and Lexie glanced at it as though searching for an answer to her troubled thoughts. She saw a small slim figure with straight shoulders that made the red suit look just as the fashionable tailor had intended it should. Her rounded chin was lifted above the furs about her neck, giving her a look of rather haughty self-approval. But there was no approval in the blue eyes that stared back at her from the mirror. Lexie viewed her dark hair under the wisp of a hat, the straight nose, the neatly arched eyebrows, and the clean line of her cheek with distinct disfavor.

"If Mark doesn't like it, I don't care what I look like," she muttered. "But why has he changed?"

The mirror gave no answer and at that moment a resounding voice jolted Lexie out of her preoccupation.

"Alexandra! I'm here. Here I am, my dear!"

Lexie took a deep breath as though to steady herself for a physical blow. Aunt Em, her father's sister, always affected her like a strong wind that must be fought against. With her booming voice, her hearty frankness, and her utter disregard for anyone else's mood or whim, Aunt Em was a force to be reckoned with.

She glanced over the press of people and soon made out the heavy figure of her aunt coming toward her. Aunt Em's gray hair strayed from beneath a bright-red turban down to the collar of the gray cloak she wore. Both hat and cloak were as much a part of Aunt Em as her great voice and the vast folds and furrows of her good-natured, plain face. For a second Lexie felt ashamed of Aunt Em. She was so horribly dressed, and you could hear her voice all over the lobby as she called out greetings to those near her. It wasn't as though Aunt Em *had* to look that way; she was reputed to be one of the wealthiest spinsters in Boston and certainly she gave away enough money in a month to clothe six people decently. Then Lexie shrugged away the disloyal thought. Everybody in Boston knew Aunt Em; she was as much a landmark as the Frog Pond or the statue of Phillips Brooks. No one expected her to look any different.

"I've been here ten minutes," shouted Aunt Em from a distance of six feet. "What's the matter with you? You look as though you need a good dose of—" Aunt Em lowered her voice to a hoarse carrying whisper as she named a well-known patent medicine.

Lexie waved the advice away with an impatient disclaimer. "I'm all right. Shall we go in?"

But Aunt Em took a firm grip on Lexie's arm and held her back. "Dr. Koussevitsky won't begin until I get there," she said confidently. "He's playing the *Fourth*—Brahms, of course—just as I advised him last month. We haven't had enough Brahms this winter, I told him and . . . Tell me what you've been up to now?" She shook Lexie none too gently. "I always told your mother she let you run

around too much. Parties, dances, and heaven knows what at all hours. You do as you please too much, and so I told her. If your father were alive, he'd . . . Is it that young man?"

Aunt Em leaned forward and peered at Lexie. "I thought so," she announced. "Too good for you, that's what. Mark Worthing's a fine young man with a career before him. He's got no time for flibbertygibbets. Why don't you come down to the Girl's Club with me some afternoon? Do something worth while."

Lexie had known Aunt Em too long to feel the effect of her unvarnished opinions too deeply. She had heard such words before and had laughed them off as "just Aunt Em's crazy ideas." Now, however, she made an effort at self-defense, chiefly to turn her aunt's thoughts from Mark Worthing.

"I do lots of worth-while things—or I used to, anyway," she said. "I nearly worked myself to the bone during the war doing Nurse's Aide at Mass. General. Then there was that China Relief business and the League—and—and lots of things like that."

Aunt Em was unimpressed. "You gave them all up when the excitement died down or when you couldn't run things the way you wanted. No stick-to-it-iveness, that's what. Always getting enthusiasms and dropping them. I don't know what's to come of it."

Lexie's cheeks grew hot. Sometimes Aunt Em hit rather too close to the mark. Suppose she *had* given up her Nurse's Aide work? There hadn't seemed so much need for it after the war; the urgency and sense of usefulness

then had made the work interesting and even thrilling. It would be nothing but work now, hard and rather grubby work. As for the other things, they had grown ordinary, too, when the first excitement of a new experience wore off. Lexie shrugged away the intimation that she must "run things" the way she wanted. That was just one of Aunt Em's notions.

"We really had better go in," she said by way of avoiding a direct reply to her aunt's accusations. "It's nearly time."

But Aunt Em had not yet finished with her. She had caught sight of someone in the crowd who reminded her of another grievance against her niece. "Look," she cried piercingly, "there's Alice Fenton. You know what she's been doing, don't you?" She gestured widely toward a tall, blonde girl on the opposite side of the lobby. "She's been a courier with the Frontier Nursing Service in Kentucky. Now that's what I call worth while; good hard outdoor work. Riding horseback all day, just what you'd like. You can ride, I'll say that for you. Why don't you—" She paused and stared hard at Lexie. "You *did* have your name in for a courier. Weren't you supposed to go this spring? What happened?"

Lexie hesitated. It was true. Her name had been entered for the Frontier Nursing Courier Service for years. Now her chance had come and she didn't want to take it. Mark was to blame; she couldn't go all the way to Kentucky and leave her relationship with him in its present uncertain state. Something would have to be decided. She would have to know how he felt about her before she did

anything else. She glanced at Aunt Em, wondering how to escape a definite reply.

"Well?" The voice was inexorable.

"I don't know," muttered Lexie. "I haven't said whether I'd go or not. I only got word a little while ago that I was accepted for March and April. I—I can't decide. It's too—"

"Bah!" Aunt Em was heartily disgusted now. "Just like you. It would do you all the good in the world to get down there and forget yourself. You talk to Alice; she had a wonderful time. Come on." Aunt Em turned toward the door and stalked majestically into the hall. "Mrs. Breckinridge is a fine woman," she announced over her shoulder. "I know her," she added, as though to prove her statement.

There seemed no adequate reply to this and Lexie followed her aunt toward the seats reserved for them. They sat down as the lights flickered a warning that the concert was about to begin. The whirr and hum of the tuning instruments rose above the blur of conversation, a soothing discordance that Lexie had always loved. But today her thoughts were too confused to take comfort even in this familiar sound. She was angry with Aunt Em, with Mark, and with herself. Everything was wrong and her indecision about the Frontier Nursing Service was evidence of her entire state of uncertainty. She let her mind drift over this sea of self-doubt, too deeply involved to hear the outburst of applause that greeted the famed conductor. The music of the *Fourth Symphony* began, and Lexie's thoughts rode on its melody.

She ought to go to Kentucky, she knew that. She had longed to go for years; had looked forward to being nineteen so that she might reach the age requirement. She had no need to talk to Alice Fenton to find out about the service. Dozens of girls from Boston had gone into the mountains for the six-week or two-month periods that the courier service offered. Lexie knew what these girls had done, how they had carried messages on horseback from one outpost nursing center to another, cared for the horses and tack, done any of the million-and-one tasks that the rural mountain existence demanded. They had loved it and gloried in the hard work, the spirit of the Nursing Service and its accomplishments. She knew, too, the work of the nurse-midwives and what they had done for the mountain people.

Lexie sighed unconsciously. Why couldn't she make up her mind to go, now that her chance had come? She wondered if Aunt Em ever was tortured by doubts and fears. The strong profile within Lexie's view made such ideas seem absurd. Aunt Em knew what she wanted out of life and how to get it. She had never married. She knew nothing, Lexie decided, of the agonizing uncertainty of lost or misplaced love.

It all came back to Mark. If he had not changed in the past few months, none of these miserable questions would rise to trouble her. She would be safely engaged to him, she could go to Kentucky secure in the knowledge that he would be waiting for her when she returned. She shut her eyes to keep back the tears and Mark's face rose before her. His dark eyes looked at her with the puzzled question she

had noted in them lately; his lean face with its long jaw and squared chin seemed to accuse her of something she could not define. Lexie opened her eyes to rid herself of his searching look.

It couldn't be that Mark no longer loved her. All during his four years at Harvard he had squired her to every dance and game on the college calendar. The Worthings and the Littletons had lived near each other on Beacon Hill for generations; the two families had been friends during all that time. Though Mark was three years older than she, he had always been one of the group that hung about Lexie Littleton, the girl who had everything, who got her own way with everyone and was the acknowledged queen of her circle. Lexie gritted her teeth. It was medical school that had changed him; his new life away from her, with that other girl he talked about so much now.

"You'd like Eleanor," Lexie could hear him say. "She's the nurse I met at the hospital where we did our ward work. She's amazing. Was in the Army for three years and is doing special work for Dr. Eliot. Eleanor Payne is her name. She's pretty wonderful."

Lexie could see the look of admiration in his face as he spoke of Eleanor. It was difficult to admit, even to herself, that Mark had never regarded her with quite the same sort of approval. In the last few weeks Lexie had noticed that Mark seemed to be watching her thoughtfully, questioning her with his eyes for an answer to something he wished to know about her. Eleanor Payne was somehow responsible for this change in Mark, for the unspoken query in his look. Lexie hated her.

She would have it out with Mark tonight. He was taking her to dinner and she would ask him then if he was in love with this Eleanor Payne. She couldn't go on in this maze of uncertainty much longer. How *could* he love anyone else? Eleanor wasn't pretty; Mark had said so. Yes, she would find out tonight at dinner. Then she would know. If he no longer loved her . . . But Lexie refused to entertain this thought. She loved him. For that very reason he must love her.

The instant the concert was over Aunt Em turned to her. "Why don't you write Mrs. Breckinridge tonight?" she demanded. "You won't regret it."

Lexie smiled briefly at this evidence that Aunt Em's mind had not been as occupied with the music as she had pretended. "Maybe," she replied evasively. "Are you taking a cab?" she asked to change the subject.

Aunt Em glared. "I've got two feet, haven't I? Cab indeed! All you young people are spoiled. Tell your mother I'll be at the house for lunch tomorrow." The crowd pushed them apart and Lexie saw the red turban bobbing away from her in the throng.

"And forget that young man!" This final boom of advice reached Lexie as Aunt Em disappeared beyond the doorway.

The house was dark when Lexie reached home. She switched on the light in the long hall and stood for a moment listening to the small sounds of the old house. There was a faint blur of voices from beyond the dining room at the rear of the hall and she knew that the maids were gossiping, probably about the family. The huge flight of stairs

to her right sloped up into gloomy darkness, the line of family portraits showing as dark blotches against the wall. Both the library and living room were dark, too, unusual at this time of day when Mrs. Littleton liked to serve tea to anyone who might drop in.

Lexie shivered, though the house was almost suffocatingly warm, and moved down the hall toward the pantry. A head appeared around the door from the dining room and a voice exclaimed, "Oh, it's you, Miss Lexie. Cook thought she heard a noise." The maid came forward and took the furs from the chair where Lexie had flung them.

"Where's Mother, Elsa? The lights ought to be on. The place looks like a morgue."

"Yes, Miss. Only it gets dark so soon like, it creeps up on you. Your mother's out to one of them meetings and she telephoned she's going to Mrs. Devon's for dinner. Cook's fixing you a nice chop right now."

There was a note of conciliation in the last statement and Lexie glanced at Elsa sharply. "But I'm going out," she said. "I'm not eating dinner here."

Elsa coughed. "Well, it's like this, Miss. That Mr. Worthing, or maybe it's Dr. Worthing, he telephoned and says to tell you he can't meet you for dinner and he'll be here around nine o'clock." Elsa seemed to feel the tensivity of the moment, for she added hurriedly, "It's something about taking somebody to the station, some young lady that's going on a train. Her name sounded like Rayne or something. It—"

"Payne." Lexie spoke through set lips.

"That's right, Miss. So Cook thought a chop—"

"Thank you, Elsa. I'll have it in my room." Lexie turned and ran up the stairs, not trusting her voice any longer. She felt Elsa's eyes follow her and heard her cluck of sympathy. It was too much! Even Elsa knew what Mark was doing to her and was sorry for her. It was the last straw. He had never gone so far as to break a date with her; it was obviously a new turning point in their relationship. And all because of Eleanor Payne! Lexie was too angry for tears, too confused to consider the significance of the news that Eleanor was going away.

She remained in the sanctuary of her room long after Elsa had brought up her dinner tray and had returned to take it away. The chop had scarcely been touched, but one look at Lexie's stormy face told Elsa it was best not to comment on the untasted meal.

"I turned up the lights in the library, Miss, and lighted the fire," she said as she took the tray. "It's real pleasant down there."

Lexie nodded. She had not yet changed from her street suit, for she had made up her mind not to see Mark when he came. She would show him he couldn't treat her in this cavalier fashion. She would refuse to see him. She opened her mouth to tell Elsa not to admit Mark, then thought better of it. There was time enough for that when he came.

When Elsa had gone Lexie went to her dressing table and stared absently at the array of bottles and perfume vials and the silver toilet set that lay there. She had always loved her room. In the heavy, Victorian atmosphere of the rest of the house this was the one room that seemed expressive of Lexie herself. The white curtains, the pale

pink and blue of the rugs, bedspread, and chair coverings she loved because of their soft texture and colors. But a beautiful room was small comfort now. Lexie groaned. She felt empty of all feeling but a dull resentment against Mark and a very lively knowledge that she hated Eleanor Payne.

She heard the muffled whir of the doorbell below and glanced at her watch. It was nearly half past nine. So he thought he could be late, too, and get away with it. Lexie sat down at her dressing table and listened to Elsa's slow feet on the stairs. Half-formed phrases and sentences whirled through her head. "Tell him I can't— Say I've gone out and— Tell him I don't—"

Elsa's discreet knock brought her to her feet.

"Tell him—" she began, shouting to make Elsa hear. "Tell him I'll—be right down." She heard Elsa move away as she raced for her closet and yanked a dress from its hanger. Her heart began to pound and she knew her cheeks were bright with color. She even found time to laugh at herself as she pulled the green wool dress over her head. It was Mark's favorite dress. Now a touch of the perfume he liked and a final brushing of her dark smooth hair. She was ready. The mirror reflected her sparkling eyes, the light of color in her lips and cheeks. Lexie nodded at her image.

"Just you look out, Eleanor Payne," she muttered.

Mark was standing by the fireplace when Lexie came into the room. For a moment he did not see her and Lexie stood still to quiet the quick beating of her heart. His long figure lounged against the mantel, even in repose

seeming to show that inaction was not customary to him. His wide shoulders and folded arms were held in their passive pose as though by an effort. The light from the fire shone up into his face, outlining his features sharply. His lips were tight shut, making his jaw seem firmer than ever. Lexie saw that his eyes did not see the fire; he was looking beyond it at something—or someone—else.

The warm glow that had animated Lexie since the doorbell rang froze into a leaden fear. A sound escaped her and Mark looked up. His eyes rested on her for a second as though not seeing her, then he grinned—the wide, friendly smile that Lexie had always loved. But lately she had seen in it more of a brotherly regard than the significance she wanted.

He straightened and held out his hand to draw her to his side. Lexie came forward as though pulled by an invisible rope. She felt his arm about her shoulder and the kiss that landed on top of her head. She looked up hopefully, but Mark was gazing at the fire once more.

“Sorry I had to call off dinner,” he said slowly, “but I didn’t know Eleanor was going today. I’d promised to put her on the train.”

The mention of the hated name forced Lexie to jerk away from him and stand on the opposite side of the hearthstone. “Of course a promise to her is more important than one to me.” Lexie regretted her show of feeling the moment she spoke, but she rushed on, “What’s happened to us, Mark?” Her voice broke on a sob.

Once Mark would have taken her in his arms when she cried. Now he only looked at her, a puzzled uncertainty

in his eyes. "Don't cry," he said. "Nothing's happened, Lexie, but—" He stopped and straightened his shoulders almost angrily. "Lexie, how do you know you love me?" he demanded. "I know you think you do, but you change so often in everything. You get tired of things and people. I can't believe you won't get tired of me."

Lexie stared at him in horrified disbelief. She tried to speak, but no words came.

Mark began to pace the floor in long, nervous strides. "I hate to say all this, Lexie, but I want to be sure for both of us." He gestured helplessly. "It's just that you've never had a chance, Lexie. How can I tell—how can I be sure you'll stick to me?"

Lexie could only look at him in amazement. If he wasn't sure of her now, he never would be and there was nothing she could do to prove her feeling. "What do you mean I've never had a chance?" she asked shakily.

Mark looked at her. "Because you've always had everything," he said simply. "Lately I've been with those who have nothing, not even hope—but they're fighters. You've never had to fight for anything; it's all been so easy. Now Eleanor—"

"Eleanor!" Lexie glared at him. "I'm sick of her! She's wonderful, I suppose, just because she's a nurse and works. Can I help it, if I—I—" She caught her breath. "I can work—and I have, too. I did Nurse's Aide for years and—"

"Got tired of it," said Mark, as Lexie hesitated. "Eleanor—or anyone like her—would stick to the job. I just put her on the train for Kentucky. She's going down to the Frontier Nursing Service hospital to take a course in mid-

wifery. I admire anyone who wants to broaden her experience that way." There was no mistaking the warmth of his tone. If he did not actually love Eleanor Payne, he respected all that she stood for in a way that, in Lexie's opinion, was dangerously akin to love.

But his words meant something else to Lexie, too, and she looked at Mark with a sudden feeling that she had found the answer. If he admired Eleanor for going to Kentucky, might he not feel the same for her if she went? She could go, the opportunity, the heaven-sent chance, was waiting for her. She spoke almost without realizing what she said.

"I'm going to the Frontier Nursing place, too," she said loudly. "I'm going as a courier and I have to ride all day and take care of horses and work like everything. I'm going in March for two months and I'll be away a long time."

Mark looked somewhat taken-aback. "I knew you had the chance to go," he said at last. "But don't go on an impulse, Lexie. It's not just fun and excitement, you know. You have to work. Have you ever taken care of a horse yourself? Doesn't the groom always do it for you? Think it over."

"I have." Lexie spoke in the same loud tone, "I know you think I'm not good for anything, but I'll show you. You wait and see."

"Lexie, please." Mark stepped forward, his hands out. "Lexie, you don't have to—"

"I'm going. I'm writing tonight to say I'll come." She looked up and saw Mark standing close. With a little cry

she threw herself into his waiting arms. "I'm going," she cried, her voice muffled in his coat. "I'll show you I can do anything that Eleanor Payne can."

But the last sentence was spoken in a whisper that Mark did not hear. He held her close and Lexie knew that even now he doubted the strength of her sudden resolve.

CHAPTER TWO

A TUMBLING freshet of water rolled down the hillside near the road and swept over the broken pavement in a muddy flood. Lexie stared at the churning water and wondered in stiffening dismay if the bus would go right through it or seek another way around to Hyden. She had been told both in Lexington and in Richmond that the "water was rising," but the warning had not prepared her for the March roads and torrents of the Kentucky mountains. Since leaving Richmond at noon the bus had traveled deeper into the mountains, over roads that Lexie would not have recognized as highways near Boston. They had climbed over tortuous twists and turns, around mountain spurs, and down into sudden valleys by a road that in many places completely disappeared under water or into a morass of mud.

Lexie glanced at her bus companions as though for confirmation of her fears, then sighed. The men and women, mountaineers all of them, looked solidly indifferent to the flood before them. They stared at the sheet of water as

though it were something they found thoroughly familiar. Their thin, work-lined faces expressed little more than a mild interest in the way the driver might negotiate this latest hazard.

"Hear the tide's worse over in Leslie," said a voice behind her. "Hit's a sight here in Clay."

Lexie caught her breath. Hyden was in Leslie County, and Hyden was Lexie's destination. She snatched at the seat before her as the bus lurched heavily; she heard the gears grind into low and a moment later the bus was bumping slowly through the swirling waters. Lexie shut her eyes and wished herself a thousand miles away, back in Boston preferably. It didn't seem possible that she had left there only the day before. A little more than twenty-four hours had brought her from the familiar safety of Boston to this rugged country.

She tried to think back over those crowded hours before she left home: the flurry of packing and shipping off the duffle bag with the outdoor work and riding clothes the Service required; that last moment with Mark at Back Bay. Even then he had doubted the wisdom of her going. She knew it as he kissed her good-by, promised to write, and hoped for her safe arrival. But Lexie had admitted no doubts, had felt only that she must prove to him that she was capable of standing on her own feet just as well and as sturdily as did Eleanor Payne. She would meet Eleanor soon. She felt that she would know when she saw Eleanor what she had to fear from her and what she must do to make Mark realize that, of the two, Lexie Littleton was by far his better choice.

"Howdy!" The soft voice jolted Lexie from her thoughts and she wondered if the greeting had been addressed to her. Then she saw the woman who had just entered the bus sit down in the seat just across the aisle. She had obviously meant the courtesy for the woman beside her. Lexie watched them. Both were dressed in thin cotton dresses with shabby coats that seemed pitifully inadequate in the brisk spring weather. Though their faces were almost cadaverous, their hands calloused, and their shoulders bowed, Lexie noted the quick alertness in their eyes, the lively interest they took in all that went on about them. Two plump, round-faced children sprawled across their respective laps, and Lexie saw the tenderness of the hands that held them, heard the soft words that soothed them.

"Yes, Lulie's my least 'un," said one of the women, and the pride in her voice was unmistakable. "Got ten more at home."

Lexie shuddered inwardly. Eleven children! It didn't seem improbable when she remembered the mountain cabins they had passed along the road. The little gray houses clung to the steep hillsides like limpets on a rock. The sloping cornfield and garden patch, empty now in the barrenness of early spring, were as much a part of each of these cabins as the swarms of children that clustered on the rickety porches and spilled over into the fenced yards. Children, pigs, chickens, and a cow or mule seemed a necessary adjunct to every homestead. Each rise and hollow of the folding hills revealed its cabin with these same

accompanying possessions. The cabins had become more scattered since leaving Manchester, where the bus began its climb higher into the hills.

A child in the rear of the bus began to wail and Lexie turned, unconsciously frowning. It was bad enough to be jounced and jolted until every bone in her body ached, without having her ears assailed as well. She saw a young woman who seemed scarcely older than herself holding a boy of five or six on her lap. The child had evidently just awakened from a nap and disliked finding himself where he was. The mother's thin arms held him tightly and Lexie heard her tired voice murmuring some words of comfort. Lexie noted that she was expecting another child in what seemed to her a very short time. A little wave of pity swept over her. The woman was pretty in a thin, weary way; her blue eyes seemed enormous in the small waxy face and her light hair curled about her neck in soft, airy tendrils. Suddenly the great eyes met Lexie's and in their depths there was a look that shocked Lexie. It was fear that she saw there, the sort of helpless terror that an animal might feel in a trap.

"Rest yourself, honey." The woman's voice was little more than a sigh. Lexie saw her glance at the man beside her and Lexie followed her look. Instantly she felt she knew a part of the reason for the woman's fear. The man beside her was a dark, forbidding creature. His heavy shoulders sagged forward as though dragged down by the weight of his great arms and enormous hands. His face was grim, workworn, and as hard as granite. Even before Lexie

heard him speak, she knew that he was the woman's husband. No wonder she was afraid—the man would terrify anyone.

"How fur a piece?" she heard the woman ask.

"Several mile more or less." The voice was harsh. "We'll git a lift by loggin' truck to Confluence. We won't git thar 'fore the edge of dark. Late to be settling a new home place."

Confluence was north of Hyden, a part of the Service territory, Lexie knew. One of the outpost nursing centers was located at Confluence. The little family was obviously new to the country; she ought to tell the woman to register at the center, so that a nurse might care for her when her child came. She opened her lips to volunteer the information, then closed them. The man's eyes met hers and something in their fierce depths told Lexie that he would not welcome interference in his affairs.

The woman sighed again and the man's voice rose suddenly on a stern note. "Repine not, woman. Hit's the will of God that sent us here."

Lexie shrank down out of sight behind the shelter of her seat. There was a furious strength in the man's voice that made her realize the force of his religious faith. More than ever she was thankful that she had not tried to volunteer aid to such a man. Obviously, in his reliance on the divine will, he felt no need of help.

She forgot the little family a moment later when a few scattered houses came into sight. They must be nearing Hyden; it was almost five o'clock, and the bus was already over an hour behind schedule. She saw a short street rising

up a hill with a cluster of small stores along its way. The street was jammed with a varied collection of old cars, modern-looking taxis, trucks of every size and yintage, and several jeeps. These vehicles were parked along the way with a fine disregard for whatever parking laws may have existed in the town, and the bus driver was forced to a snail's pace to make his way among them.

Lexie was vaguely disappointed as she looked about her. Hyden seemed no different from any number of small towns in the North. Somehow she had expected to see mountaineers carrying rifles, women in sunbonnets, and all the violent color that one read about or saw in the movies as typical of the mountain region. The men and women on the streets were depressingly normal and there was not a sunbonnet or rifle to be seen.

The bus stopped before a highly modern drugstore at the top of the street, and Lexie saw a jeep parked just beneath the window where she sat. Lying across the seat of the jeep was a slate-blue coat and on the sleeve Lexie made out three initials, F.N.S. Her heart missed a beat. It was a uniform coat belonging to a member of the Frontier Nursing Service! In this sprawling town, among these strangers, there was an organization, a group of people, that was familiar. She took her suitcase from the rack above her and followed the slender, frightened woman, who had sat behind her, from the bus. She noted that the woman carried the heavy, fretful child while her husband stalked ahead with two battered boxes that must contain their worldly possessions. Lexie wondered where their furniture was, but forgot the matter a moment later.

"You're Lexie Littleton." It was more of a statement than a question and Lexie very nearly fell off the lower step of the bus.

A girl stood before her, her hand out and a wide smile lighting her round freckled face. Her dark hair stood out around her head in a rampant disarray of curls; her brown eyes, flecked with gold, looked straight into Lexie's own and seemed to offer both friendship and welcome in their steady glance. The snub nose and short chin gave her a look of impudent gaiety that her freckles and smile only served to emphasize.

"I'm Liz Dixon," said the girl, as Lexie continued to stare at her, still wondering how she had guessed her identity. "Resident courier." She took Lexie's suitcase in her strong brown hands and with a quick, decisive motion swung it behind her into the back of the near-by jeep. "We thought you'd be on this bus. Watch out!"

Liz snatched at Lexie's arm and pulled her back toward the sidewalk as a car swooped around the corner and careened down the hill. "Saturday afternoon," explained Liz easily. "Everybody's in town." She seemed to feel no rancor toward the reckless driver; he was obviously a part of the town life and to be accepted as such.

Lexie took a deep breath and followed Liz to the drug-store. "I want to telephone over to Wendover to say you've come," Liz called over her shoulder. "That is, if I can get a call through."

Lexie quickened her step almost to a trot, for Liz moved swiftly; her slim legs in their neatly fitted jodhpurs had already outdistanced Lexie. She caught sight of Liz's blue

shirt in the crowd about the soda fountain and heard her clear voice as she called a greeting to the man behind the counter. Liz was obviously on friendly terms with all these people no matter who they were or how well she knew them.

"May I use the telephone, Jim? Is the line open to Wendover?" Liz spoke briskly, moving toward the rear of the store as she asked her questions, as though impatient of any delay.

"Kin try." Jim's voice was slow and easy. "Got the hospital just now."

Liz, with Lexie at her heels, reached the old-fashioned box telephone on the rear wall. "The river's up," explained Liz, as she turned the crank on the instrument to call the operator. "You know we couriers live at Wendover, but we can't get back by jeep tonight. We'll have to stay at the hospital and try the river or the swinging bridge in the morning." Liz jerked the crank with a hasty gesture in her efforts to attract the operator's attention.

Lexie knew that Wendover was the headquarters of the Nursing Service, the location of the staff offices, the main stables, and the director's home. Back in Boston she had made an assiduous study of the *Bulletin*, issued quarterly by the Service, and felt she had a picture of the life she might expect in the hills. She had seen photographs of the river in flood and even of a swinging bridge, but she had never quite visualized herself as a victim of either. Liz appeared to take both as a matter of course.

"H-how far is Wendover and where's the hospital?" Lexie made a valiant effort to steady her voice and speak

naturally. But she knew that she would be afraid of a flooded river, and a swinging bridge sounded hideously perilous.

"Five miles to Wendover, just up the Middle Fork. The hospital's up the hill." Liz nodded toward the front of the store and Lexie remembered then the stone building she had seen from the bus on the brow of the hill over Hyden. It had impressed her as looming out over the town in a protective fashion; it looked as though it were watching over the surrounding countryside.

"The Middle Fork's the river that runs by Wendover, isn't it? Does it get flooded often?" Lexie tried to sound casual.

But Liz did not answer. She had reached the operator and her voice startled Lexie into silence. "Lillie? Lillie, get me Wendover!" Liz was fairly shrieking into the telephone. "Line's nearly dead," she confided to Lexie in a more normal tone. Then in an even louder bellow, "Joan, that you? She's here! . . . What's that? The cow mash? I'll ask. . . . Not yet, but— Okay, tell Mrs. Breckinridge we'll be over in the morning."

Lexie glanced toward the crowd about the soda fountain, but no one was even looking their way. Evidently they were used to telephone conversations that could be heard for blocks.

"Tell Debbie I can't get that hand lotion. It's— Never mind. . . . I said *never mind*." Liz coughed and hung the receiver on its hook. "Went dead," she said cheerfully. "Telephoning around here is an art."

“Don’t all the nursing centers have telephones?” asked Lexie.

“The hospital and Wendover do and a couple of the centers. We used to have more, but the big flood carried them away, so the telephone company just gave up. That’s what we couriers are for; we take the place of telephones.” Liz grinned, then thrust a slip of paper into Lexie’s hand. “Would you mind getting these things for me? Here’s some cash.” She pulled a crumpled wad of bills from her pocket. “You can get everything here. Jim will help you. I’ve got to see about that pump for Beech Fork and the cow mash.” Liz was gone before Lexie could reply.

She looked at the list in her hand and frowned. It was written in obvious haste in a scratchy handwriting that must be difficult to read in the best circumstances.

“ ‘Six pks. chewing gum for Debbie?’ ’ she read. “ ‘No spearmint or bubble. Abby wants hair pins, hairnet, brown and not white like last time. Also candy, chewy, and nuts. Fifty cents worth. Nail file for Joan and toothpaste. Candy for dining room, lots. No more choc. covered cherries. Tired of them. Shoe lace for me.’ ”

Lexie sighed as she finished reading. Evidently no one at Wendover cared how much candy she ate or what it might do to her waistline. Lexie, who was proud of her slim figure, resolved not to fall into the prevailing habit at Wendover. It would never do to get fat while she was away from Mark.

Jim, an angular, friendly man, seemed to realize her puzzlement, for he took the list from her and soon had her

order filled. "Tell Miss Briston we're still waitin' on the hairnets," he said, as he handed the package to her. "Only got white. Can't keep stock. You new here? Where you from?"

Lexie nodded. There was good nature in Jim's voice and in his eyes, but it made her nervous to talk to anyone who seemed so interested in her affairs. In Boston one never asked questions of strangers. She did not answer him and walked hurriedly by the crowd of men and women near the door. They seemed to watch her and to be asking the same questions Jim had. Several of the men were roughly dressed in work-soiled overalls and tattered sweaters. They looked like coal miners. Perhaps they were, for Lexie knew there were mines in the region. Suppose one of them should speak to her? Lexie held her breath until she was safely on the sidewalk. With vast relief she saw Liz waiting for her in the jeep.

"What's the matter?" There was concern in Liz's voice, as she reached out to help Lexie into the seat beside her. "Watch out for that pump handle." She pushed the metal shaft to one side as Lexie sank down beside her. "Skirts weren't made for jeeps," she went on. "You'll be glad to get into jeans. Don't let these pants scare you. I only wear them in town when I have to dress up."

Lexie was relieved that Liz appeared to have forgotten her first question. It would never do to admit that the men in the store had frightened her. She glanced behind her at the heaped collection of articles in the body of the jeep. Her suitcase was perched on a pile of feed bags, the pump handle rested across a huge roll of what seemed

to be tar paper, and a large galvanized bucket leaned across a bundle of window shades.

"Are these—do you often have to get things like this?" she asked.

"Oh, this is just some stuff for Wendover and Beech Fork. We've been waiting for that roofing for Pig Palace for weeks. Miss Freeman will be so glad it's come." The engine started with a muffled roar and subsided to a low hum under Liz's skillful handling. "I— Good night!" The exclamation was a shout. "I almost forgot Prudy."

Lexie had no time to ask who Prudy might be. A second later a large furry brown body hurled itself into the jeep, landing in her lap with a thud that nearly drove her breath away. Lexie gasped and shrank back in dismay. It was a dog; it had only taken her one shocked second to realize that. But a dog in such close and sudden contact was almost too much for her equilibrium. Instinctively she reached out to push Prudy away, but Prudy was comfortable and immediately sat down. Lexie liked dogs, but Prudy was heavy and somewhat too friendly for her taste.

"Is he—does he *have* to sit on me?" Lexie knew she spoke crossly, but she had been startled and did not stop to think.

But Liz did not hear. She was patting Prudy's head, murmuring endearments and begging forgiveness for having temporarily forgotten her pet. "I didn't mean it, darling. Poor Prudy, was she forgotten? There now, get down on the floor and behave."

Prudy refused to budge. "You like dogs, I hope," said Liz at last. "Just about everybody has one."

Lexie muttered a resigned assent. Prudy had moved off her lap now and was lying beside her with her head on her knees. Her large brown eyes looked up at her with a sort of approving candor. Somehow it was oddly comforting that Prudy should accept her in this fashion.

"She likes you," said Liz, as she started the jeep once more. Lexie felt that she might have added, "Well, that's a point for you." She was glad Liz had not heard her first exclamation. If Prudy was a means of ingratiating herself with Liz, she would let the dog sit on her lap all day. Somehow Liz was a person whose approval Lexie wanted. She patted Prudy with a more visible show of affection.

The jeep swung down the short hill and turned sharply to the left. More than once Liz leaned out to wave or call a greeting to a passer-by. She seemed to know everyone and to have a gay word for each one.

"I suppose all these people are patients of the nurses," said Lexie airily, as the jeep climbed the hospital hill. She saw that they had left Hyden behind them and were mounting a hill above the town.

Lexie was unconscious of a condescension in her voice until Liz glanced at her quickly and said, "Look, Lexie, they are all friends of the Service. We all know and like them."

Lexie's cheeks reddened and she sought desperately for something to say that would change the subject. If she was supposed to like these mountain people, she had made an inauspicious beginning in Liz's eyes, she was certain.

"There's Joy House!" It was Liz who rescued her from embarrassment and she sounded as friendly and brisk as

ever. "The resident doctor and his family live there. Right near the hospital, you see."

Lexie caught a glimpse of a comfortable square house before the jeep rounded a hairpin turn and ground up a steep rise. The hospital loomed above them, its stone walls lighted to a dull crimson by the setting sun.

"Aunt Hattie's Barn down there," went on Liz as they stopped before the hospital door. She gestured toward the drive that led to the rear of the building and jumped out of the jeep with an expert swing of her legs that showed long practice. "The horses and cows live in the barn. Mardi Cottage, where the student midwives live, up behind." Liz rattled off the information with such machine-gun speed that Lexie was bewildered.

She climbed stiffly and thankfully from the jeep and reached the ground just as Liz called a greeting to someone within the hospital. A light, crisp voice replied and Lexie's heart gave a bound. Suppose that voice belonged to Eleanor Payne?

"It's you, Liz! You found her, I see. We're so glad." Lexie was conscious of a thin pleasant face looking down on her from the steps and felt a slim brown hand in hers. "I'm Nancy Edwards. Do come in. Let me take your luggage."

The warm quick voice that Lexie recognized as British in origin seemed to accept her as a friend already. There was the same easy acceptance of her in that voice and manner that she had noted in Liz's greeting. Were all the F.N.S. people like this? she wondered. They seemed so glad to see her, so anxious to make her welcome. There was

no fuss made over her; they appeared to take her for granted as one of themselves already. The friendliness lessened any sense of strangeness and made Lexie feel that they wanted her to feel at home.

"Nancy's superintendent of the hospital," explained Liz, nodding at the nurse. "Do you want to show Lexie where she's to bunk tonight?" she added, as she handed out Lexie's suitcase. "King ought to be back from rounds and I have to take him over to Wendover tomorrow. Want to see about that shoe."

Liz was gone, disappearing around the side of the building with Prudy at her heels. A large black dog and a fox terrier of mixed ancestry, who had followed Nancy out the door, joined Prudy.

"Supper in ten minutes," Nancy called after her. "Liz is worried about King; he cast a shoe yesterday and his hoof's tender. Liz always frets about any animal that's even slightly off his feed."

Lexie felt that her head was spinning. King must be a horse, but the way they spoke of him he might be a human being. Without realizing that she did so, she let Nancy take her suitcase and carry it up the short flight of steps into the hospital. Lexie followed her into an office with filing cabinets along one wall. Two desks and a heap of paper cartons half filled the remaining floor space. She saw a dining hall with a long table on her left and beyond that a living room with chintz-covered chairs grouped before an enormous fireplace. Several girls were in the living room, some in nurse's white, others in the slate blue riding uniform that bespoke the F.N.S. nurse-midwife. But

Lexie only had a glimpse of them as Nancy whisked her toward the stairs at the back of the office.

"Just time for a wash and brush-up before supper," said Nancy. "You will sleep in the sewing room tonight. Bathroom down the way. Sorry, but I must see the doctor before he leaves."

With a nod and another friendly smile Nancy left Lexie in the small room at the top of the stairs. A sewing machine and a stack of linen occupied much of the confined area. The narrow cot bed in one corner must be intended for her. Lexie set her suitcase on the floor, as a sudden memory of her soft white bed at home swept over her. She was tired; every bone in her body ached from the violent activity of her recent bus ride. It was a long, long way home to the familiarity of Beacon Street. She was a long, long way from Mark. Two tears dropped down her cheeks. Lexie longed with all her heart for the luxury of a good, homesick cry.

But the thought of Mark reminded her of Eleanor Payne. She might be in the hospital at this very moment. If she were taking the midwifery course, she must be. Lexie wiped her tears away with a fierce gesture of her fists. Eleanor Payne should never see her cry.

Ten minutes later Lexie descended the stairs. Voices, a medley of chattering sound, came from the dining room. Eleanor must be one of the speakers. In another moment they would meet face to face. Lexie took a long, slow breath and stepped over the threshold into the dining room. Some dozen girls were just coming in from the living room to find their places at the long refectory table. A

whirling confusion swept over Lexie; the girls became a bobbing, smiling sea of faces.

Then she saw Nancy coming toward her, her hand out to draw her toward a chair at her right. "I'll introduce you to everyone when we find our places," said Nancy. A rattle of chairs, a buzz of talk, and a moment later the girls were seated. Lexie stole a look down the long table. There were dark heads, light heads, tan heads; faces that were thin or rounded, pretty or plain. Which belonged to Eleanor Payne? She heard Nancy call out the name of each girl, saw the nod and smile of welcome from each one. The names were a blur, they meant nothing, for none of them was Eleanor Payne.

The murmur of sound broke forth again. Lexie caught names and references, some of them familiar. Beech Fork. Bull Creek. Thousandsticks. The clinic at Stinnett. Postpartum call. Prenatal visit. Kate on rounds. King's shoe. Worm treatment for the Masons. The words blurred, cleared, then became nothing more than a hum of sound in Lexie's ears. She was desperately tired. The girl next to her spoke to her several times, but Lexie could only murmur a reply. They were talking about the Service and their work, she knew that, but the names and references soon lost their meaning.

"Has your duffle bag come, do you know, Lexie?" It was Nancy who spoke and the sound of her name woke Lexie from her confusion.

She stared helplessly at her questioner, then shook her head. If the clothing she had sent by post had not come, she would have nothing but street clothes to wear.

"It's not at Wendover," announced Liz from across the table. "Don't worry," she added hastily. "The mails are often late. We can lend you stuff from grab until it comes."

Her easy confidence failed to reassure Lexie. How could she go around in borrowed clothes? she wondered. They wouldn't fit. She would look a sight. Not that many of these girls seemed to worry about their appearance. Except for those in uniform, they wore shirts and jeans with a casual disregard for style that startled Lexie's tidy soul. None of them bothered with make-up, either. Lexie began to feel uncomfortably conspicuous with her reddened lips and carefully powdered nose.

"Where's Eleanor?" It was Liz who asked the question and it jolted Lexie from her preoccupation like the sound of a rifle shot. She stiffened as she waited for Nancy's answer.

"At Wendover." The crisp English voice spoke as lightly as ever. "She was called over today to help with the general nursing. She'll be there for a month anyway, until the new course starts."

Lexie let her breath out slowly. So Eleanor was at Wendover. Tomorrow she would be there, too. Then Nancy spoke again, "You might know Eleanor Payne, Lexie. She's from Boston. She's been on our staff at the hospital for the past two months, until the new midwifery course begins in April. She's a—"

"No, I don't know her!" The words burst from Lexie, before Nancy could finish her sentence. Lexie knew what Nancy had intended to say; that Eleanor Payne was a

“wonderful girl.” She had heard that before from another source. She did not want to hear it again.

“Well, you’ll meet her tomorrow.” There was no indication that Nancy had noticed Lexie’s rudeness.

Tomorrow! Lexie tried to shut it out of her mind. If tomorrow meant Eleanor Payne, she did not know whether she looked forward to it or not.

CHAPTER THREE

BREAKFAST was at seven the next morning. Though Lexie had slept soundly on the cot bed, she was amazed that everyone could look and feel so cheerful at such an unearthly hour of the day. She wondered, as she listened to the rattle of plans and schedules called back and forth among the nurses, how many years it had been since she had breakfasted before nine.

"Liz has run down to town for a bit," said Nancy, turning to Lexie. "They rang up from Wendover for something they want her to bring over with her. She may try to take Bounce across the river or walk over the swinging bridge. Debbie is to fetch the mail by way of the bridge, I imagine."

Lexie looked so honestly bewildered by this choice and the difficulty of deciding who Debbie and Bounce might be that Nancy laughed apologetically. "I'm so sorry! I must remember you are new here. Debbie is our other junior courier. I imagine you and she will bunk together in the Garden House. That's where the couriers and most of the staff members live," she added quickly, as Lexie's

eyebrows rose in question. "It's one of the buildings at Wendover."

"And Bounce?"

"Bounce is the Wendover jeep. Willie's the jeep that met you yesterday." Nancy laughed. "Everything here is named, even some of our favorite trees. But I must run. You can choose Bounce or the bridge when you come to them. While you wait for Liz would you like to see our wards? I'm on my way there."

The other girls had already scattered to their various duties, so Lexie followed Nancy, feeling somewhat in the way and wishing that she also had something definite to do. The hospital nurses and the half dozen graduate nurse student midwives were already at work. The Hyden district nurse, dressed in riding uniform, was shouldering a pair of saddlebags in the office as Nancy and Lexie mounted the stairs.

"Is there a regular nursing district in Hyden, too?" asked Lexie, as the nurse disappeared in the direction of Aunt Hattie's Barn.

Nancy nodded. "A big one. Jan's going over Hospital Hill to the Thousandsticks clinic this morning. Each district has clinic once a week, either at one of our clinic buildings or the center itself. We have hospital clinic here as well. There's one this morning and the people will be coming along any moment now."

They reached the upper hall as Nancy finished speaking and entered the door leading to the hospital wards. A concerted wail reached Lexie's ears and she looked at Nancy, wondering if these baby sounds indicated trouble.

"Breakfast time," said Nancy smiling. "The babies' bassinets are right beside their mothers' beds, but they get impatient just the same. Just a moment." She motioned Lexie to stay where she was, as she opened a door to their right. "How's my little preemie?" she asked the nurse within.

Lexie caught a glimpse of several bassinets and a nurse bending over one in a corner. She wore a mask, but Lexie did not need to see her face to catch her tender concern for her tiny charge. The nurse looked up and nodded. "Gained a half ounce," she said. "She's doing beautifully."

"Good!" Nancy closed the door and led Lexie down the hall. "That preemie—premature baby, you know—weighed only two pounds when it was born. She has a chance though. We once had one who weighed just that at birth and he's a big, healthy boy right now."

"I suppose you put them in an incubator," said Lexie, proud of her knowledge of the ordinary hospital procedure.

"Heavens no! We haven't one," was the cheerful reply. "Here's the operating room, supply room, and linen room on this side." She indicated the rooms hurriedly, then turned toward the wards across the hall. "Twice a year doctors from outside come in for our surgery clinic and for a tonsil clinic. Those are hectic and wonderful times for us. Now here are our mothers and babies."

Lexie followed Nancy into the large, sun-filled room. Two rows of beds, each one occupied by a mother and child, seemed to fill it completely. Lexie was conscious of a calm, incurious gaze from each mother, and of the peace-

ful quiet that characterized the room. The babies were having breakfast and their complete absorption lent the ward an atmosphere of utter peace. Nancy spoke a few gentle words to each woman in a tone that was reassurance and comfort in itself. The warmth, the cheer of the sun, and the relaxed peace of each mother and child made Lexie realize suddenly that this was a pleasant place, a place that love and care had created.

The feeling lingered with her as Nancy led her into the children's ward near by. The cots or cribs here were for older children and Lexie was greeted with round-eyed stares from each bed as she entered. A rocking chair in one corner of the big room caught her eye.

"We rock them whenever we get time," said Nancy, following her look. "Not regular hospital procedure, I imagine. All children come here free of charge, you know. Everything is free for the children. The women who are delivered at the hospital pay a fee, of course."

"I thought all the babies were born in the cabins," said Lexie. "Isn't that what the nurse-midwives do?"

"Generally, of course, but some cases need our doctor. That's one of our nurses' chief concerns—to know just when a case may be complicated and need hospitalization. You'll see what the nurses do at Wendover. The couriers may go out with them at night, you know, on delivery call."

Lexie caught her breath and choked back an exclamation. Nancy spoke as though going on night call were a privilege. A mental picture of a horseback ride in the darkness through this wild mountain region rose before her

eyes. She could not face it; she would have to think of some excuse when the time came.

"I wonder if Liz is back yet," she said desperately.

"I shouldn't wonder. Run along to the office. It's been nice to have you with us. Come again soon." Nancy held out her hand. Her voice held the same note of crisp firmness that was characteristic of all the Britishers that Lexie had ever known. But Lexie wondered if it was quite as friendly as before. Perhaps Nancy had read her thought. Her cheeks flamed all the way down the hall. No one she had met in the Service seemed to admit fear or dread. Was she the only person who was uncertain of herself? Was Eleanor Payne as self-contained, as completely and casually efficient, as the girls she had met? Lexie set her lips in a tight line. Eleanor Payne was one person who would never know how she felt.

Liz's voice greeted her as she reached the foot of the stairs. "All set? Bounce is loaded to the gunwales, but he's always willing to do his duty."

Liz, carrying a pair of saddlebags on each slim shoulder, her arms laden with a miscellaneous collection of clothing and rubber boots, nodded at her from the outer door. Lexie, whose suitcase had appeared mysteriously from the sewing room, followed her out into the bright sunlight.

"What about that horse, King or whatever his name is?" she asked, as she clambered past Prudy to fight for possession of the front seat. The rear of the jeep was now fairly jammed with boxes, cartons, the pump handle, and other unwieldy objects. Lexie put her suitcase at her feet and tried not to think of the flooded Middle Fork.

"I'm coming back for him later," replied Liz. "Have to get this gear across first. Look out for that carton. It's full of horse medicine. We were almost out of linseed oil and colic remedy, so it's precious."

Lexie rested her elbow on the box behind her and turned to look back at the hospital as Bounce swung down the hill. It looked deceptively quiet in the morning light, but she knew what a stir of quiet activity lay behind its walls.

"They all seem awfully busy," she said inadequately. "Is it always like that?"

"Heavens, it's practically a dead calm this morning. You ought to be around during clinic hours or when every bed is full and we set up others in the corridors. That's really fun. Hi, Callie." Liz waved to a woman who passed them at the turn of the road.

They swung into Hyden's main street and gathered speed, the jeep lurching over the broken sections of roadway with bone-rattling force.

"Jim told me a pathetic story this morning," said Liz, as they left the town behind them. "Seems Tom Corey brought his family in from outside yesterday. He works for a lumber company down near Confluence." Liz, who evidently saw no need to be silent when there was a chance to talk, spoke with less of her usual cheerful gaiety.

Lexie's interest quickened. Liz must mean the little family she had seen on the bus.

"He expected one of the company trucks to meet them and take them on down river, but the truck broke down, I guess. Anyway Tom wouldn't ask anyone else to give them

a lift, so they spent the night on the Court House steps. It was cold last night, if you remember."

"Why wouldn't he ask for help?" demanded Lexie. She remembered the thin, frightened woman and shivered.

"Too proud. If only someone had noticed them, we could have arranged transportation without hurting his pride, I know. I wish we'd known the family was coming."

Lexie opened her mouth to say that she had seen them, then closed it. She could not bear to confess that she had noticed the family and then forgotten them so completely. Somehow she felt that anyone connected with the F.N.S. would have taken the trouble to find out whether they had started on the road to Confluence. Liz, she was sure, would not have forgotten them the moment they were out of her sight.

"Did—did they get a truck this morning?" she asked in a small voice.

"The one they expected turned up at last. It was a shame though. I wish we'd known," she repeated.

Lexie said nothing, but Liz did not need a reply to keep the conversation going. She rattled on at her customary pace, pointing out the roadside land marks as they drove along.

The road led along the base of a brown and barren mountain, winding in and out in obedience to the contours of the hills. Lexie saw great shelves of rock above her, piled slabs of stone that seemed in danger of sliding into the road. In many places streams of water poured off the mountain, crossing the highway in a muddy flood. Every-

thing in Lexie's eyes was either gray or brown. No leaves showed on the trees; the grass was still a dead winter-killed brown. On all sides she saw what seemed a sea of oozing mud; there was mud on the road, beside it, and on the hill-sides. Lexie closed her eyes. It was hideous, a wasteland of rocks and hills and mud. She opened her eyes a moment later to see a yellow blaze of color flaming in the yard of a roadside house.

"Forsythia!" she cried. "Oh, and daffodils, too." She leaned out to stare at the blaze of color as though it were an oasis in a desert.

"Lottie always has the earliest flowers," said Liz. "We get crocuses and snowdrops this time of year too. I love watching the first green things. We have a wonderful spring garden at Wendover. Do you like flowers?"

Lexie, who had never given the matter much thought, felt the enthusiasm in Liz's voice and nodded. It might act as a point in her favor to say she did.

"We report each new one that we see," said Liz. "I got the first snowdrop this year. Oh, there's Abby!" She leaned out to wave and shout at an F.N.S. nurse who passed them on horseback. Lexie caught a glimpse of her laden saddlebags, the sturdy brown horse, and the quick smile of the uniformed nurse.

"She must be going to see Deanie's new baby," said Liz. "Then up Muncie. That means she got across the river, so it's all right for us. There's the Tin Garage."

Lexie had time only to see the outline of a small tin building beside the road before the jeep swung sharply

to the left and dipped suddenly off the road, straight toward the tumbling brown water of a creek.

"What's the matter? What's happened?" Lexie clung to the side of the jeep, her hands stiff with terror. "Look out!"

Liz took time to stare at her a second, then she grinned apologetically. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just too used to this. This is the mouth of Muncie Creek. We go down it just a little way to the ford." Liz paused momentarily to shift gears and a second later the jeep was in the stream. Lexie took one look at the swirling sea of brown water, then she closed her eyes. She opened them almost at once for she needed all her senses to keep her place in the jeep. It bumped along over the stones, tipping first one way and then the other with sickening irregularity.

"W-what about the b-bridge?" she demanded, through set teeth. "Look out for that rock!"

"I see it," was the calm reply. "I knew Debbie wouldn't be coming out with the mail, if Abby got over. See, there's the swinging bridge up there."

They emerged from the screen of trees which lined the creek and Lexie gave a quick look to the right. There high above her head was a slender wooden bridge suspended on cables. It had no handrail but a wire netting and looked like nothing so much as a spider web arched above the water. Lexie had a vivid picture of herself on that frail-seeming bridge. She shook her head. Anything was better than that giddy height. But was it? She gasped as she turned to the river, spreading its brown slow-mov-

ing flood before them. It looked ominous somehow. It moved so silently, so inexorably. The opposite shore seemed miles away.

"Better put your suitcase in your lap," said Liz casually. "And lift up your feet; it's going to be deep." She turned the jeep to the left to follow the shore line, then swung out toward the center of the river. "The Middle Fork's in her prime today," she added, as they jolted slowly forward.

There was something in her tone that angered Lexie. Liz sounded pleased with the river, as though it were testing this newcomer to Wendover and putting her on her mettle. If this was what the Middle Fork was capable of, then she, Lexie Littleton, would show the river and everyone else that it couldn't make her cry out. Lexie shut her mouth so tightly that a white line showed around its edges. With the suitcase balanced on her lap, her feet lifted as high as the dashboard, and Prudy pushing her toward the open side of the jeep, Lexie fought for a hold for her hands and for her pride. She wouldn't scream, nothing should make her scream. She saw the water rising up the side of the jeep, heard its lapping gurgle as it reached and washed over the floor boards.

"Don't watch the water," said Liz. "It makes some people dizzy. When you cross the river or the creeks on horseback, it's especially important to keep your eyes up."

Lexie spared a moment to think of herself on horseback in such a watery world, then shut the thought out of her mind. It just couldn't happen to her. She stared fixedly

at the mud-laden bank before her, wondering where in that morass of tree-roots, underbrush, and mud Liz planned to take the jeep. Then, at a particularly steep spot on the shore, she saw a rutted area that must pass for a road. Liz swung toward it and a few minutes later they were grinding up the bank.

“Good old Bounce,” said Liz, patting the steering wheel. “Just a mile now to Wendover. Hope the road’s drained off some.”

Lexie had little time to congratulate herself or the jeep on the successful crossing. The road occupied all her attention. Its ruts and ridges required skillful maneuvering, while the ever-present mud was a hazard that only a jeep could master. But Liz handled Bounce as though the jeep were responsive to her slightest wish, maintaining a balance on the ridges that seemed little short of miraculous to Lexie. Liz, whose conversational powers were entirely unchecked by the difficulties of driving, even took time to point out the bull pen near the road, a favorite tree beside the river, and finally the pasture area for the Wendover cows and horses.

“And there it is!” she exclaimed suddenly. “There’s Wendover!”

Lexie looked up the hillside to the left and through a screen of trees saw a spreading log house above the river. It seemed a part of the hills and rocks and trees, as though it had grown there without the help of human hands.

“Garden House beyond,” said Liz. She stopped at a hairpin curve that twisted up to the left and backed the jeep around in order to make the turn. They ground

through a liquid mudhole and mounted a steep rise toward the Wendover buildings.

"This is Pig Alley. You see why." Liz indicated a pig pen and a cow shed beyond it. "Hey, reach out and grab that rope!"

Lexie saw a gate across the road and a rope handle dangling near her side of the jeep. She caught at it obediently and the pull gate opened inward.

"Good! Lots of people don't get the trick of these gates at first. Here we are. There's the Garden House and the stable. Good for Debbie. She's got all the horses out!"

Lexie saw a large building by the driveway at her right and beyond the open door of a stable. Half a dozen horses were tethered to a fence by the drive, dozing in the sun. Except for the horses, there was no other living being in sight.

"What wonderful looking horses!" The exclamation was purely spontaneous, for Lexie had ridden since she was a child and recognized the good points of a horse. These looked sturdy and intelligent, and it was obvious that their shaggy winter coats had received careful grooming.

"They're darlings," replied Liz, as she halted the jeep under the Garden House wall. "Where's everybody? Hi!"

Instantly, as though her cry were some special signal, several heads appeared in the windows above them. Lexie could make little of what followed. She knew that each head possessed a voice and that each of these voices was demanding to be heard.

"Did you get the salve? Where's Willie? What about my toothpaste? Abby says—Beech Fork wants that pump

handle. Did you get the candy?" The last question predominated finally and was only stilled when Liz shouted an affirmative.

"This is Lexie Littleton, everybody," said Liz, when she could make herself heard. "There's Lanny, Joan and—where's Debbie?"

Lexie nodded at the chorus of greeting that fell down on her and tried not to feel self-conscious as she clambered over the side of the jeep.

"Come right in," said a quiet voice just above her head. "The stair's at the end. I'll show you your room."

Lexie saw an older woman with a round pleasant face nodding at her from the end window.

"That's Joan Freeman," said Liz, who was already unloading the jeep. "She's the executive secretary, you know, and the terrible-tempered tyrant who bosses the Garden House and all us couriers." She nodded affectionately at the gentle-voiced woman, who rewarded her with a delighted smile.

Lexie picked her way across the muddy road and up the steps to the house. Miss Freeman, who was as round in figure as she was in face, greeted her cordially at the door.

"It's so nice to have you," she said. "Let's see. Your duffle hasn't come, so I've put some things from grab in your room. Just find something that fits and Liz will show you everything outside." Her voice went on as a murmuring accompaniment, as she led Lexie up the stairs to a corridor. Rooms opened out on either hand and from one or two Lexie caught the sound of voices. She wondered suddenly if Eleanor were one of these girls. She had not heard

her name, but her introduction had been so casual she might have missed it. She hated to ask about her; she knew that her voice would show a special concern and no one must know that Eleanor Payne meant anything to her.

The double room in mid-corridor held two beds, two bureaus, several chairs, and a sea of scattered personal possessions that covered most of the room's furniture. Miss Freeman sighed.

"You girls! I cleared one bed; there are the things from grab on it. I must get Debbie to take time to pick up." She smiled, then put her hand on Lexie's arm. "We're so glad you're here," she repeated, her soft voice warm with welcome. "Anything you want, just come to me in my office downstairs." She nodded and was gone, moving so quickly and lightly that Lexie scarcely heard her footsteps.

Lexie looked about her. Among the shirts, jeans, muddy shoes, and sweaters that littered the room, she saw a small radio, a victrola, and a heap of records. A screw driver and hammer lay on one bed beside a dismantled birdhouse and a broken flashlight. Lexie groaned. If Debbie, her unknown roommate, kept her possessions in this condition, it was going to be a test of patience to live with her. Lexie liked things in their proper place; her sense of order was one of her strongest instincts.

Then she saw a slip of paper pinned over her bed. On it in huge capitals was written, "Lexie's bed." It was both a welcome and a sign to Lexie. She knew then that whatever Debbie might be, she had wanted to make her feel at home. In better spirits, Lexie chose a pair of jodhpurs

from the heap of clothing and began to change. She discarded a heavy pair of hiking boots in favor of light jodhpur boots and took several minutes to decide between a blue or white shirt. Dressed at last to her satisfaction she went down to hear Liz calling to her from the stableyard.

"I've got to start back for King," she said, when Lexie appeared. "My, you look fairly gorgeous. Those boots will be solid mud in ten seconds. Didn't they give you some rubber boots or hiking shoes?"

Lexie looked at the churned mud that lay between the Garden House steps and the stable door. She knew she looked well in riding clothes and rather resented Liz's inference that she was inappropriately dressed. "I don't mind a little wet," she said. She stepped forward and immediately sank to her ankles in the dark ooze.

Liz for once said nothing, but Lexie saw her eyebrows twitch. No matter how wet and mud-bespattered she became, Lexie vowed she wouldn't complain in Liz's hearing.

"Debbie's somewhere around," continued Liz hurriedly. "Sorry I can't wait to introduce you, but she'll be back in a second. Why don't you get acquainted with the horses? I'll introduce you. Here, starting at this end, are Dandy, Miss Pat, Jackie, Cham, Pete, and Orestes. They're all lambs, but watch out for Cham's heels. He's nervous."

"Do they all belong here?" asked Lexie, taking special note of Cham. He was coal black and easily distinguishable from the rest that varied from a light bay to deep chestnut.

"Oh, no. Dandy and Pete are in for a rest from district,

and Orestes belongs at Beech Fork. He's recovering from colic. That's one of our chief duties—to take horses from one center to another, bringing one in for rest and taking out a substitute. Well, I must run. Debbie will—" But the rest of her sentence was lost in the roar of Bounce's engine. Liz flipped one hand in Lexie's direction and turned the jeep with the decisive speed with which she did everything.

Lexie waved her out of sight, then stood staring at the line of horses. She felt that Liz's introduction had been slightly hasty and decided to approach the animals more closely. Taking a wide swing around Dandy, she went slowly toward him, her hand out. Dandy opened one eye as she came near and immediately closed it. He apparently felt that he could wait to know her better.

"Don't let Dandy get the best of you," said a voice just behind her. "He always sleeps when he can."

There was an incisive businesslike note in the newcomer's voice that made Lexie turn quickly, wondering if she had shown her apprehension in approaching these strange horses too plainly. She saw a tall girl with dark hair and level blue eyes standing beside her. Her face was angular and rather colorless, but it was firmly modeled and she looked intelligent. There was a purposeful air about this girl that struck Lexie immediately. She was obviously as briskly efficient as her direct glance and rather definite voice indicated. Lexie knew that she was someone who, in Aunt Em's phraseology, had "no nonsense about her." She wore blue jeans pushed into the tops of very muddy boots and her leather jacket had seen much

service. Since she carried a heap of manila envelopes under one arm, Lexie decided she must be one of the office staff.

"Oh, I won't let him fool me," said Lexie, anxious to prove that the horses held no terrors for her. She reached out and patted Dandy's nose with an assured air.

Dandy woke up suddenly and jerked his head toward her with startling violence. Lexie leaped to a safe distance and looked at him distastefully. "Goodness," she exclaimed involuntarily, "he—he almost scared me."

The girl looked at her and Lexie knew that she had recognized her real nervousness. "You'll get used to them," she said. "I had never ridden until I came here, but I made myself learn. You have to make up your mind to it." She spoke kindly and Lexie knew that, in spite of her authoritative tone, she was trying to reassure her.

"I've ridden most of my life," replied Lexie, eager to cover up what she felt must be a bad first impression of her powers as a horsewoman. "I've watched the stablemen groom horses, so I guess I won't have much trouble."

The girl nodded without speaking, then, glancing toward the stable, she announced suddenly, "There's Debbie!"

Lexie turned to look as a new voice shouted at them from the driveway, "Hi there, you all!"

For a moment Lexie could only stare at the girl who came toward them. She was like a Dresden doll with her light curling hair, her soft complexion and very round blue eyes. Not much bigger than Lexie she looked entirely incapable of thinking or acting in any capacity but that of the pretty toy she resembled. Her voice betrayed

her Southern origin and a vision of moonlight and magnolias on an old plantation house veranda swept into Lexie's mind. The thought was gone again instantly; one look at Debbie was sufficient to dispel any notions of the typical Southern belle. Her jeans were stiff with mud, her hands grimed with dirt, and she carried a bundle of tools under one arm.

"Been mendin' a saddle," said Debbie, smiling and nodding at Lexie. "Can't for my life shake hands. I'm just filthy. I'm real sorry I wasn't here to tell you hello when you came. Hi, Dandy, darlin'." Debbie hugged Dandy with her free arm.

Lexie decided that few if any of Debbie's questions or comments needed an answer and it was plain that none was expected. Murmuring endearments to Dandy, Debbie dumped her load of tools on the ground and began untying his tether.

"Time to water the horses. Here, Elly, you and Lexie want to help?" She looked directly at the tall, dark-haired girl and in that moment Lexie knew to whom she had been speaking.

So this was Eleanor Payne; this brisk, efficient, entirely competent girl to whom she, Lexie, had betrayed her nervousness over the horses and her inexperience in handling them. For a second Lexie had a dreadful impulse to turn and run, to hide herself away until she could collect her thoughts and impressions of her rival. For Lexie understood now something of Mark's feeling for this girl and why he admired her. She was so entirely the opposite of herself, so completely capable of handling herself

and her affairs, that Mark must have found her a refreshing change from the youthful inadequacies and inconsequential gaiety of a Lexie Littleton. Lexie had guessed before she met Eleanor that she might be something like this and had resolved that she would prove that she could be just as capable and worldly-wise as she. Now in their first encounter Lexie had ruined any chance of impressing Eleanor that way, and a sickening sense of shame and anger swept over her. Probably Eleanor would write Mark about meeting her and he, too, would hear how Dandy had shown up her lack of assurance.

Lexie knew she was staring at Eleanor and it was only with an effort that she kept control of her expression. Eleanor nodded at her and smiled. "I knew you were Mark's little friend," she said briskly. "I thought you knew who I was. Sorry. Here, let me show you how we water the horses." She reached out to take Dandy's rope which Debbie had thrust into Lexie's hands.

"Mark's little friend." The expression hit Lexie like a physical blow. "No," she exclaimed violently, quite unconscious of the force in her voice. "I can do it."

Eleanor looked straight at her for a second, then turned toward the next horse in the line along the fence. She said nothing, but Lexie felt that she understood the reason for that brusque refusal of help.

Lexie clutched Dandy's rope, yanking him toward the watering trough near the Garden House steps. Dandy turned as though propelled by a spring and pulled Lexie after him. The rope began to slip from Lexie's fingers and she made a furious grab for it. But Dandy had sensed his

nearness to freedom and, with a toss of his head, jerked the rope from Lexie's hands.

"Hey!" Debbie's blurred Southern voice was raised in a note of alarm. "Watch out for Dandy! He'll run a hundred miles 'fore we catch up to him."

Lexie heard the rush of hoofs and saw Dandy as he turned to dash for the pullgate.

"Grab the rope! Stop him!" cried Debbie.

But Lexie acted on impulse. She leaped for the safety of the steps as Dandy tore past her, his rope trailing. As she reached her vantage post, she looked down and saw Eleanor watching her. Eleanor was smiling and, in Lexie's opinion, that smile was one of triumph as well as amusement.

CHAPTER FOUR

IT was Debbie who brought Dandy back to the watering trough. He had not been able to get beyond the pull-gate, so his dash for freedom had been more in the nature of a gesture than a flight. During the few minutes it took Debbie to capture the runaway, Lexie stood on the steps, wondering whether she would ever be able to live down the humiliation of her show of fear. Her leap for the steps had been instinctive and nothing she could do or say would hide its significance.

She stood quite still and watched Eleanor from the corner of her eyes. Why wasn't she dressed in the F.N.S. uniform? Why had she approached her as she had? Wasn't it in order to find out what sort of person she was without letting Lexie know her identity? Feeling as she did about Eleanor, Lexie was prepared to believe her capable of anything like this.

"Dandy tried to run away with me once," said Eleanor. "I had quite a tussle with him before he'd quiet down." She spoke without any show of feeling, but Lexie knew that she was trying to make the blunder less blameworthy.

Coming from another person, or even in a calmer moment, Lexie would have appreciated this fact. But now she read a note of condescension in Eleanor's tone. It was as though she were talking to a child.

"The rope slipped," said Lexie, surprised at the loudness of her voice. "It must have had grease on it or something."

"I sure didn't notice it." Debbie stood before her with Dandy at her heels. Lexie saw that her round eyes were studying her with a clear understanding in their blue depths. Some of the softness had gone out of her face, too. "Take the rope and water him, hear?" Debbie held out the tether without looking at Lexie again.

Lexie, who had half-feared, half-hoped that she might escape the duty of watering the horses, snatched at the rope, her fingers tense. She understood Debbie's look and knew that she had seen through her attempt to excuse herself. Lexie set her teeth. She would hang on to the rope this time no matter what Dandy might do.

"I'm sorry, Debbie. I'll have to change before lunch. I'm on duty this afternoon. Can you and Lexie manage all right?" It seemed to Lexie that Eleanor was quite certain that they could not do without her help.

"Sure thing." Debbie spoke with easy confidence and Lexie wondered if she were included in this surety.

Lexie said nothing to Eleanor, did not even look at her as she walked down the drive past the stables. She watched Dandy drink, believing that he was laughing at her as the others must be. His eyebrows were raised and there was no doubt about the look of smug satisfaction about his mouth.

The moment Eleanor was out of sight, Lexie could restrain herself no longer. "Why was El—that girl dressed in those clothes? Isn't she a nurse? I thought she was one of the staff workers."

"She's a nurse sure enough. What we all call a floater right now." Debbie's soft voice was as easy and natural as it had been at first. "She's helpin' Abby on district now. I reckon she was workin' with Joan this mornin'. There's one million things that need doin' around here."

Lexie led Dandy back to the fence, her thoughts in confusion. Perhaps she had misjudged Eleanor. Perhaps Eleanor had not really been as condescending as she supposed. Then Lexie remembered how Eleanor had laughed at her when she jumped for the fence. Lexie knew that she could never forgive Eleanor Payne that moment of triumphant laughter.

Debbie spoke from just behind her and jolted Lexie from her thoughts. "Here now, just you let me show how we make that knot."

Lexie realized that she had been fumbling with an awkward knot for some time. Dandy was eyeing the next horse in a speculative way, as though planning the best mode of attack. She watched Debbie make a simple clove hitch at a post farther from the other horses. It looked easy and she vowed to remember it.

"Now you do Cham and we'll be through," said Debbie. "Then I'd be real glad to show you around the stables." There was no overtone of doubt in Debbie's voice or manner, no apparent feeling that she held the recent mishap against her or expected it to happen again. She did not

even seem to watch Lexie as she went hesitantly toward the huge black horse. Lexie was both grateful and bewildered by this easy confidence in her ability. But her strongest feeling was one of determination. She would prove that she could do it and that she could overcome her fear.

Just as she reached for Cham's tether she remembered his propensity for kicking. Her hand trembled suddenly and she drew back involuntarily. Cham tossed his head, startled by her sudden motion. Lexie caught her breath. Behind her she could hear Debbie talking to Orestes; she had evidently not noticed Lexie's hesitation.

"I *will* do it." Lexie was astonished at the very force of her whispered words. She reached forward and untied the tether with fingers that seemed suddenly to have turned to boneless rubber. At any moment now Cham would whirl about as Dandy had done and charge for the trough. Instead Cham stood perfectly still; then, with a confiding gesture, his nose came forward and rubbed along her sleeve.

"Why, he likes me!"

Lexie's astonishment made Debbie laugh. "He's a real old softie. Just loves candy, too. Here!" Debbie handed Lexie a small bit of chocolate. "Give it to him and he'll be followin' you like a houn' puppy. You'll be ridin' him right much, so act friendly. He's a wonderful horse. Has a marvelous runnin' walk."

Cham behaved with exemplary good humor while he was being watered and Lexie had quite forgotten his kicking habits by the time she led him back to his place. It was only when they passed too close behind the line of horses

that Lexie had it forcibly recalled to mind. Cham evidently objected to this close proximity to his mates, for he swung around suddenly and attempted a kick at the nearest tethered horse. Lexie, who had let her fears relax, was roused to the fact that the rope was slipping from her hand.

"Come here, idiot," she called, gripping the rope. Almost without realizing what she did, she yanked at Cham's rope, hauling him out of the way. He responded willingly enough, evidently satisfied with his brief show of resentment. She secured him to a post at a safe distance from his companions and only then had time to realize that she had not let her fear get the best of her. She had acted promptly and avoided what might have been a fracas.

A feeling of enormous satisfaction swept over her and she glanced at Debbie, hoping for commendation. But Debbie only smiled at her as though what she had done were nothing more than what was expected. A little cloud settled over Lexie's spirit. Why hadn't Debbie congratulated her? After all it was something to have pulled that great horse away from the threatened danger. It was worth a word of praise.

But Debbie did not appear to notice any change in Lexie's manner. She led her toward the stables, talking as unconcernedly as though nothing unusual had happened. "Tackroom there," she said, gesturing toward a door to the left of the stables. "Saddles, bridles, blankets, and all like that kept there. Some horse medicine, too. Plain everyday stuff like blue lotion and ointment for cuts or scratches."

There was something incongruous to Lexie about the professional air with which Debbie rattled off this informa-

tion. In spite of her soiled and workmanlike clothes, she looked so dainty, her voice was so soft, that it seemed impossible she should know or care anything about such things as horse liniment and saddle soap. But Lexie did not betray her feeling and sniffed the smell of leather and liniment that pervaded the room. It was a good smell and one that was familiar to her. The riding stables at home always smelled like this. The rows of saddles on the wooden braces, the bridles hanging over them, and the shelf of soaps, oils, and medicines looked beautifully neat, as though much care had been expended there.

The stables with the box stalls and open runway were equally well-cared-for. Lexie recognized the high standard that kept this place in its ordered cleanliness.

"Do the couriers do the stables, too?" she asked, wondering how she would like cleaning a box stall.

"My goodness, no. The barn men tend to that and feed the horses too. We get at them right after breakfast. Curry and brush them, clean their hoofs, and all like that. Then we saddle up for the nurse or anyone goin' out. We get to exercise them, if they aren't used durin' the day. Dandy and Cham are just dyin' for a run, so we'll get a ride this afternoon. Oh, here's Abby! That's Jason she's ridin'. What a powerful mess he's got himself into."

From the stable door Lexie watched the nurse come toward them. Her horse was caked with mud, his tail dripping with water and mud and even the saddle and blanket splashed and soaking.

"Where you been?" shouted Debbie, as she went forward to take the bridle. "Oh, this here's Lexie Littleton."

Abby Briston a tall girl with dark auburn hair and a square, rather expressionless face, smiled at Lexie as she slid to the ground. Her uniform was spattered with mud and her boots were almost solidly caked with a thick, brown ooze. "Nice to see you." Her voice was slow and unemotional. "I've been up Muncie. Got to clean up before lunch. See you." Abby nodded rather vaguely in Lexie's direction and went toward the Garden House.

While Abby had been talking Debbie had removed Jason's saddle and bridle and had slipped a halter over his head. Lexie watched her deft movements, wondering if she could learn to handle the heavy equipment with such skill. Debbie hoisted the saddle on her slim shoulders as though its weight were nothing. There was no doubt that her seeming frailty was deceiving.

"We just have to wait till the saddle is dry 'fore we can do anythin' about it," said Debbie. She took a brush and scraper from the tackroom and handed the brush to Lexie. "Just you get the worst off till he dries, hear? It's like pullin' teeth to curry them when they're drippin' wet like this. It just rubs in the mud."

Lexie made a tentative dab at Jason's shoulder as Debbie scraped the worst of the wetness from his belly and legs. There was a patch of caked mud near where the saddle blanket had rested and Lexie wondered if she should try to remove all of it. Jason had a way of backing off from the brush that Lexie found disconcerting. It must mean that he didn't like being cleaned and might possibly resent it with his heels. Lexie skipped over the mud patch and concentrated on Jason's forequarters.

“Don’t forget the back legs, hear?” said Debbie. “That’s bound to be enough on the front.”

Lexie, who had lingered over Jason’s forequarters in hope that Debbie would take over the rest of the job, took a position well away from the horse’s heels. She leaned forward at an awkward angle and reached toward Jason’s flank. The next moment something that felt like a handful of wet mud hit her full in the face. Lexie lost her precarious balance and sat down with a thud.

When she opened her eyes she saw Debbie peering at her from behind Jason and it was obvious that she was trying not to laugh. “B-better get up; there’s a foot of mud where Jason landed you,” said Debbie, struggling to control her voice. “I’m real sorry I didn’t tell you that Jason’s tail is a right powerful weapon.”

For a moment Lexie stared at Debbie, then her sense of humor got the better of her. She knew what she must look like; she could see her sodden boots, her splashed jacket and the morass of thick ooze in which she sat. The trickle of water running down her nose told her what had happened to her face. She began to laugh, genuine amusement fighting with a nervous hysteria. Then she felt Debbie’s hand on her arm helping her up.

“You get along to the room and change, hear? I’ll finish Jason.” There was more warmth in Debbie’s voice than Lexie had heard there before. “Don’t you let any of these horses get you down. Just be firm, give them a good talkin’ to.” To illustrate her point she gave Jason a smart push with her shoulder that swung the horse away from Lexie. She began brushing him vigorously, scolding him with

mock severity each time he shifted position. Though Debbie was so short that she scarcely reached Jason's shoulder, Lexie noticed that she did her job thoroughly.

"I—I'll help," said Lexie, feeling that she must maintain favor in Debbie's eyes.

"No you won't. You'll catch your death in those wet things. Look here, those jodhpur boots just won't do. Too thin. I've got some rubber boots that ought to fit you. They're under my bed or maybe in the closet. There are some jeans somewhere there, too. You get fixed up and it'll be time for lunch. I'll wait here for you, so hurry. I'm starvin' to death—as always."

When Lexie returned, clean and dry in the borrowed clothes, she found Debbie waiting impatiently by the stable door. They walked along the drive past the stable, a chicken run, and a small log house which Debbie described as The Cabin. "A couple of the staff live there, and there's a little chapel, too. We have Sunday afternoon services and it's wonderful—sort of different somehow. Watch out for Mr. Saltina!"

A gander lurched at Lexie's ankles, hissing with a ferocity that made her heart skip. He retired as Debbie waved at him and went back to his mate beneath a clump of lilacs.

"He just naturally loves to show off," said Debbie easily. "Down this way." She indicated a path that branched down to the left. Ahead Lexie could see the log walls of the Big House through a screen of trees. "The Upper and Lower Shelf are up the hill." Debbie gestured to the rough brown houses on the hillside. "Livin' quarters, too. Here we are."

They crossed a stone terrace that looked out over the river and entered a door that led directly into the dining room. Lexie saw a long refectory table laden with food. Around the table was a double row of about a dozen faces that seemed to consist of nothing but eyes, all of them watching her.

"Here." Debbie pulled her into a chair near the end of the table and sat down beside her. "Lexie Littleton, everybody." Once again Lexie heard a rattle of names, saw the nod and smile of welcome that each name evoked. She recognized Abby and Joan and saw Eleanor nod at her from the farther end of the table. At that moment Lexie's principal feeling was one of relief that she was not required to sit near Eleanor Payne.

Lunch passed in a blur of voices and laughter. Lexie was chiefly conscious that the same atmosphere of good-natured friendliness and high spirits pervaded here as it had at the hospital. These girls and women seemed to enjoy one another's company and to be equally friendly to all. There was laughter, some good-natured teasing, and a comradeship that Lexie was not slow to sense. Once when someone made a reference to the horses, Lexie remembered the incident with Dandy. Now was the time for Eleanor or Debbie to tell what she had done. Lexie stiffened herself for that revealing sidelight on her fear.

"Everything's goin' just fine," she heard Debbie say. "Lexie's already groomed Jason and that's an acid test."

A glow of gratitude warmed Lexie. She knew she hadn't groomed Jason or anything approaching it, and Debbie had made no mention of Dandy. For a second she was

tempted to tell how Jason had tossed her into the mud, then she saw Eleanor glance at her. Once again Lexie found it impossible to read the meaning behind that calm, almost expressionless look. The impulse to tell of her mishap died an instant death; she could not bring herself to mention it in front of Eleanor Payne.

"Where is Mrs. Breckinridge?" she asked Debbie, under cover of the general conversation.

"She doesn't always come down for lunch. She works in her room mornings, you know. You'll meet her at tea. Come along, we've got to finish Jason and saddle up for Elly. Maybe she'll let us ride along with her on her rounds this afternoon."

Before Lexie could express an opinion on the last suggestion, Debbie had disappeared out the door leaving Lexie to follow. Some of the anticipation of her first ride in the hills evaporated as she contemplated taking it in Eleanor's company. It would be fun with Debbie. With Eleanor along she must watch her every move and statement to make certain that she said or did nothing that would reveal her inexperience or lack-of assurance.

As Lexie walked toward the stables her spirits lifted. It was a beautiful clear day of sun and wind. The air smelled of the earth and its promise of new growth. Below she could hear the running murmur of the river. No, it was impossible to worry about Eleanor Payne or anything with a sky so blue and with this joyous freshness in the air. Just before her Lexie saw a woman walking along the drive. She carried a bucket in one hand and what seemed to be a bunch of green leaves in the other. Lexie had not seen her

before and, as she came near, she remembered that everyone at Wendover greeted a stranger as a friend. She was a part of Wendover now and ought to act as the others did. She quickened her pace and caught up with the woman. As she reached her side, she said in her best imitation of the hill country greeting, "Howdy!"

The woman paused and turned to look at Lexie. She had iron-gray hair, cut short about her head, and very blue eyes that seemed to twinkle as they met Lexie's. There was something still and quiet in her face as though much of the peace of the hills had grown into her thoughts.

"Howdy," she answered promptly. Her voice was full, and even that one word rang with a cadence of its own.

Lexie sought desperately for a remark that would keep the conversation alive. "I'm new here," she said hurriedly. "It's—it's a wonderful place, isn't it? Have you been here long?"

The twinkle became a laugh in the woman's eyes. She smiled suddenly, a smile that lighted her face and seemed to include Lexie in its amusement. "Yes," she replied. "Yes, I've been here a long time."

Lexie knew then to whom she had been speaking. What would Mrs. Breckinridge think of her for pouncing on her as she had with her silly attempt at friendliness? Lexie's face flamed and she longed to sink out of sight beneath the ground.

"I—I—" she stammered and then gave up the effort to explain herself.

But Mrs. Breckinridge took no notice of her confusion. "You are Lexie Littleton, I know. We are so glad to have

you here, my dear. Your aunt and I have known each other for many years."

"Yes, I know," said Lexie, still miserably conscious that she must have made a very poor first impression on Mrs. Breckinridge.

"I'm delighted you like Wendover. I'm on my way to feed my chickens. We'll have a chance for a talk at tea." She smiled and turned away toward the chicken houses. The goose and gander followed after her, clucking and hissing in response to their mistress' words of greeting.

Lexie went on to the stables somewhat comforted by Mrs. Breckinridge's graceful manner of ignoring her confusion. Lexie was grateful, but she would have given worlds to have thought before she spoke. She might have guessed that anyone who looked and spoke like that must be the director of the Frontier Nursing Service.

She found that Debbie had saddled Miss Pat and Dandy and was standing by Cham with his saddle on her shoulder. "Here, I'll show you how we saddle up," she called. "Grab that blanket, hear?" She indicated a piece of thick felt on the rail near by.

Lexie took it automatically, her thoughts still on Mrs. Breckinridge. She tossed the blanket on Cham's back and watched as Debbie placed the saddle on it. It was a Buena Vista saddle with a slightly raised cantle and pommel and wide wooden stirrups. Debbie showed her how to secure the girth and made her practice tying the leather thong several times.

"He loves to swell up so it's fightin' hard to tighten the girth. You just have to watch him," said Debbie. "Now for

the bridle." With a quick motion she slipped the halter from his head and, to Lexie's dismay, forced the bit between his teeth. In Lexie's opinion Cham had the biggest and yellowest teeth she had ever seen.

"Now you do it, hear?" Debbie removed the bridle and handed it to Lexie.

For a second Lexie wanted to refuse pointblank. Then her pride came to her rescue. She had made a fool of herself more than once that day and she resolved not to do so again. At that moment she heard Eleanor's voice behind them and she fairly snatched the bridle from Debbie's hand. She would do it now no matter what happened. Almost without thinking she grasped the bit and pushed it into Cham's mouth. An instant later she had the headpiece over his ears and was fastening the throat latch.

"Hey, good for you!" There was surprise as well as congratulation in Debbie's voice, but Lexie did not care. She had done it and Eleanor Payne had seen her.

When Eleanor had fitted her saddlebags over Miss Pat's saddle they were ready to start. From her reading of the *Bulletin*, Lexie knew that the nurses carried all their essential equipment in these saddlebags and that they were carefully fitted out for any emergency. Special saddlebags were always kept ready for delivery calls.

"I've only got one call," said Eleanor as she swung up into her saddle with the competent air that characterized all her movements. "Up Hurricane to see the Jewetts. Aunt Sairey wants more of that rheumatism liniment." She spoke crisply as though prepared to deal with rheumatism or any other human ill.

“Oh, good enough!” cried Debbie. “There are just about a hundred Jewetts, I guess, and they’re just grand. Aunt Sairey is the grandmother, really, and her daughter has ten children or maybe more. All set, Lexie?”

Lexie led Cham to a mounting stone and a moment later was in the saddle. She was in her element now; this was what she was used to. She had ridden for years and knew she was a good rider. She followed behind Eleanor and Debbie through the pullgate along the muddy road beside the river. Cham maintained a deliberate pace, picking his way in and out of the mudholes with a skill that showed long practice. She found that she had very little to do in guiding him; he knew the best footing far more accurately than she.

“We’ll have to cross the mouth of Hurricane Creek,” Debbie called back to her. “Just you follow Dandy and you’ll be all right.”

Lexie, who was watching the swollen river so near the road, suppressed an exclamation. Hurricane Creek sounded ominous, and if it was anything like the river she did not look forward to crossing it. A few minutes later she realized that her liveliest fears seemed about to become a reality. She saw a rushing torrent of water that obliterated the road and ran headlong to join the Middle Fork. The road ended here and it was plain that Eleanor and Debbie were prepared to enter directly into the water.

“Pull your feet up, hear?” was Debbie’s casual advice, as Dandy stepped into the water.

Lexie closed her eyes and when she opened them Cham was already in the water. She saw its brown flood swirl

about his knees and rise rapidly toward her stirrups. An uncomfortable giddiness made her senses swirl and she grabbed the pommel. Cham was following Dandy of his own accord; there was nothing she need do but hang on. Then she remembered Liz's advice about not watching the water. She forced herself to look up and stared straight before her through Cham's ears. The water was up to the saddle blankets of the horses ahead, but Lexie saw that neither Debbie nor Eleanor was gripping her saddle. She wrenched her fingers from the pommel and with her stirrups held high tightened her knees on the saddle. It must be all right; both the other girls and the horses, too, seemed to be taking this perilous crossing for granted. Though every impulse within her urged Lexie to cry out, she gritted her teeth and concentrated on keeping her balance.

They were out of the water and riding along a rutted wood road beside the creek before Lexie allowed herself to draw a full breath. But before she had time to congratulate herself, the road turned down to cross the creek and Lexie found herself in the water once more. Here the going seemed more precarious than before, for huge stones jutted from the water, obstacles past which Cham picked his way with apparent indifference. The road became a path on the opposite side of the creek, sometimes following close beside the water, then mounting steeply to a ledge of stone on higher ground. On either side of the creek the mountains closed in. It seemed to Lexie that they were following a narrow gorge that led deeper and deeper into the barren brown hills. Occasionally they passed a cabin with the same sort of cornfield and garden patch beside it that

Lexie had noticed on the Hyden road. Children ran out to see them pass and often a man or woman appeared on the porch. To all these people Debbie and Eleanor called a welcome, greeting each one by name. The houses looked bare and forlorn in Lexie's eyes, but the children were as plump and rosy and healthy as those she had seen on the bus.

"How can they be so healthy living in those dreary places?" she asked Debbie, as they passed a particularly shabby house.

"They are, though, until they get worms," said Debbie. "They come from real good stock and get a right good start in life. Of course there are schools, and lots of the young people even go to college. But they love their hills and almost always come home again. When you've been here a while you'll understand how this country can get you." Debbie spoke seriously and Lexie saw a dreamy look in her eyes.

Lexie glanced ahead at the tumbling water of the creek, at the rocks and boulders that filled it, then raised her eyes to the sweep of hills that rose so steeply on either hand. Leafless trees and masses of rock alternated with cleared land on their steep slopes. Within the hollows and valleys were patches of cultivated land, each with its log house and tiny fields tilting skyward. It was stark and barren in Lexie's eyes; there was no beauty here, only desolation and poverty. She might learn to love it as Debbie prophesied, but right now she felt only its lonely wildness.

"Watch out," called Debbie suddenly. "We're goin' up here. Better hang on to Cham's mane." Debbie, who

looked like a fragile doll perched on Dandy's back, clutched at his mane as she called out her warning.

"Up here" proved to be an almost perpendicular hillside leading off to the left. A small path twisted up through a scrubby undergrowth, winding past rocks and trees. Lexie had time only to snatch at Cham's mane before he plunged up the hill after Dandy, scrabbling through a pasty mud that would have offered an uncertain foothold on level ground. Once again Lexie found that Cham needed no guidance from her; he picked his way through the mud and stones as though he were thoroughly accustomed to such footing.

A few minutes later they emerged on a hilltop. Just beyond was a log house. Lexie heard a shout of welcome and the next moment a swarm of bright-eyed, round-cheeked children had tumbled out the door to stand on the porch and stare at the visitors. A wooden fence surrounded a bare patch of ground before the house and, as the horses approached, a cluster of hens scuttled beneath the porch for safety.

"Just tie Cham to the fence, hear?" said Debbie. "Oh, there's Aunt Sairey. Howdy! May we all come in?"

Lexie saw a tall, slender woman with snow-white hair standing in the doorway. Even at this distance Lexie could see that her printed calico dress was as starched and clean as human hands could make it and that the white apron over it looked like a drift of snow. A slow, aged voice called, "Come in and welcome."

Lexie tossed the reins over a fence post and followed Debbie and Eleanor across the yard. A pig snorted at them

from a pen in one corner and a red rooster called defiance from the branches of a tree. Lexie quickened her pace as a cow wandered from behind the house and stared at them with bovine curiosity. The children stood aside, smiling shyly, as they came on the porch. One small tot, barefooted and dressed in a much mended cotton smock, looked up at Lexie with such open awe in her blue eyes that Lexie wanted to reassure her.

"Hello," she said, reaching forward to pat her head.

The child ducked behind an older sister and peered out at her. There was something in the beauty of the child's pale hair, her rosy cheeks and round eyes, that reminded Lexie of a Renaissance angel.

"Why, she's lovely!" she exclaimed voluntarily.

"All Aunt Sairey's grandchildren are beautiful. Aren't they, Aunt Sairey?" Debbie held out her hand to the older woman. "Where's Essie?"

"They be as they be," was the quiet reply. "Essie's down the road a piece gittin' firewood. Will you kindly come in?"

Lexie had time to note the thin face of the old woman, the waxy whiteness of the skin drawn tightly over the finely modeled bones, before she followed Debbie across the threshold. There was beauty in this face, too, the beauty of a calm old age.

But Lexie forgot Aunt Sairey the moment she found herself in the house. They entered directly into a room which contained two double beds covered with patchwork quilts. The beds took up nearly all the space that was not occupied by two small straight-backed chairs placed before

a stone fireplace where a coal fire burned in a grate. The walls were covered with sheets cut from magazines, a varied display of pictures ranging from those of movie stars to advertisements. The floor of wide boards was bare and scrubbed almost white. The whole room was as neat and clean as its crowded furnishings allowed.

Then Lexie noticed that Aunt Sairey was motioning her to a chair. Lexie hesitated. In spite of the room's obvious cleanliness, she wondered whether she should risk sitting in one of those chairs. Who could tell what she might catch in a place where so many people lived crowded together? Then she felt a tug on her jacket and Debbie yanked her down to a seat by the fire.

Only then did Aunt Sairey's courtesy allow her to take a seat on the edge of the bed. She heard Debbie introduce her, but Lexie was too embarrassed by her own lack of manners to do more than mumble a reply. Through an open door across the room she could see another room almost identical with this, the floor space chiefly occupied by beds. How was it possible for so many people to live like this in a two-room cabin on a lonely hilltop? Lexie was so occupied with this problem that she scarcely listened to the conversation between the others. She heard Eleanor's deliberate professional voice as she inquired about Aunt Sairey's ailments and recognized the sure skill and knowledge of her questions. There was no doubt that Eleanor Payne knew her job as a nurse.

A sudden shout from one of the children brought Lexie to her feet.

"He's got away!" was the cry. "The horse has got away!"

Even before she leaped for the door Lexie knew which horse they meant. She remembered how she had tossed Cham's reins over the post, neglecting to secure them.

"It's Cham, sure enough," said Debbie from behind her.

Lexie caught a glimpse of the runaway as he disappeared over the edge of the hill, his reins dangling toward the ground. She felt that Eleanor was behind her, watching, too. She must say something, must explain her carelessness somehow.

"One of the children must have untied him." The words escaped her involuntarily. They seemed very clear and loud in the quietness of the small room.

"I'll ride after him." It was Debbie's voice, but it sounded cold.

Lexie saw Debbie go past her and cross the yard to the fence. She could feel the silence behind her, and now she knew that Eleanor was watching her.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN uneasy silence fell over the little room when Debbie had gone. Even the children seemed to sense the discomfort in the house, for they drifted off the porch to play in the yard. Lexie knew that they must have heard her accusation and imagined that they wanted to get as far away from her as possible. Why had she blamed her own carelessness on them? Lexie knew the answer as soon as it formed in her thoughts. It was because she couldn't bear to have Eleanor Payne know that she was capable of such a stupid act. But Eleanor knew that the children had not loosed Cham and Lexie's hasty words had merely served to make her fault doubly obvious. If a merciful providence could recall those words, Lexie knew now that she would never speak them again.

She went back to her chair by the fire and sat staring at the floor, wishing with all her heart that there was something she could do or say to show that she knew that she was to blame for Cham's escape. From beneath her eyebrows she could see Eleanor standing near Aunt Sairey by the bed. Once Lexie opened her lips to speak, then closed

them tightly. No, she couldn't risk another look from those level blue eyes. Let Eleanor think what she might, Lexie could not admit to her that she had been wrong.

"Aunt Sairey tells me that Tandy Grayson wants to see one of the nurses." Eleanor's voice was as cool as ever. "She lives up the creek a way, so I'll go along and see her. You better stay here and wait for Debbie and you two can go home together. Good-by, Aunt Sairey. I hope the liniment does you good. I'll stop by in a day or two."

Eleanor's words seemed to Lexie more in the nature of a command than a suggestion and she was in no mood to dispute them. She heard Eleanor say good-by to Aunt Sairey but did not watch her go. The steady glow of the little fire seemed the only friendly thing in the room and Lexie held out her hands toward it. She did not relax her tension until she heard Eleanor calling good-by to the children in the yard. Then Aunt Sairey moved slowly back into the room and took the chair on the opposite side of the hearth. Lexie could see the gleam of her white apron and her gnarled hands folded quietly in her lap. There was something in the peace of her pose and the utter quiet of the little room that made Lexie long to confess to her. Somehow she felt sure that Aunt Sairey would understand and forgive her.

"I—" she began and stopped. She looked straight at Aunt Sairey and to her vast surprise saw that the hundreds of laugh wrinkles about the old woman's vivid blue eyes were puckered with amusement.

"You newly come from outside?" asked Aunt Sairey softly.

Lexie nodded miserably.

"Hit takes a sight of experience to know them horses." Aunt Sairey smoothed her spotless apron and glanced at Lexie. So she knew the truth, too. Lexie's face began to burn with more than the heat of the fire.

"We folk are mighty partial to the nurses—and the horses. We'd never aim to harm them."

"I know." Lexie's voice shook. "It—it was my fault. I didn't tie him right."

Aunt Sairey nodded. "Thar's a sight to larn with a horse," she said. She took a piece of bright calico from a box near her chair and began to sew. It was plain that she accepted Lexie's admission as an apology and was prepared to forget the matter.

Lexie straightened her shoulders as though a weight had been lifted from them. If anyone had told her even half an hour ago that this old woman's forgiveness could mean so much Lexie would not have believed it. But there was something in those blue eyes that made anything but absolute honesty unthinkable. It was easy to confess a fault to her and vastly comforting to know that she understood. Somehow Lexie knew that she did and that she even realized why it was that Lexie had spoken those hasty words.

"What are you making?" In spite of her new found assurance, Lexie wanted to get away from the subject of Cham.

"Piecin' a quilt. Hit's the Double Weddin' Ring. I quilted all the quilts on them beds. Hit's the Nine Diamond over thar and the Fish Tail thar." Aunt Sairey in-

licated the quilts and Lexie got up to inspect them more closely. The bright squares were sewn by hand in intricate patterns that made an effective and colorful design. It almost made Lexie's eyes ache in sympathy to think of the thousands of stitches that went into each one.

"Do many of the women make quilts?" she asked, anxious to keep on this safe topic of conversation.

"Several," said Aunt Sairey. "Some's the purtiest things you ever did see, but hit hain't like hit was. Store bought goods is what the womenfolk mostly gits now. Hit's a—"

But Aunt Sairey never finished her sentence. A shrill scream from the yard cut her short and a scampering of bare feet on the porch announced one of the children's approach. The next moment a panting, white-faced girl of about twelve burst into the room.

"Hit's Lem. He's kilt, kilt with the ax!"

Lexie leaped to her feet as Aunt Sairey moved with surprising speed toward the door. "Git the medicine bottle." Aunt Sairey's voice was as calm as ever. "Git some of them clean rags, too."

But before Aunt Sairey reached the porch, a small boy led by an older sister appeared in the door. His mouth was wide open in a roar of terror, tears streamed from his eyes and the hand that he held stiffly before him dripped blood on the scrubbed floor.

Lexie's first reaction was one of relief. Len wasn't dead; he had only cut his hand. It was a deep cut; she could see that even without a closer inspection, but Lem was not as fatally hurt as the first warning cry had indicated.

Aunt Sairey took the child on her lap and rocked him

soothingly. "Hit's shameful," she crooned. "Whar's them rags and the medicine."

The twelve-year-old appeared from the next room with a bundle of rags and a dark bottle in her hands. "Hyar they is, Aunt Sairey. Is Lem kilt?"

Lexie moved forward quickly and leaned down to inspect the wound. She saw the child shrink away from her and knew that he was afraid of her. Perhaps he feared that it was he that she blamed for Cham's escapade. "Let me help," she said suddenly. "I know how to fix cuts and tie them up."

The child's shrieks redoubled, but Aunt Sairey gave him a small shake. "Rest, rest," she admonished gently. "The nurse aims to help."

Lem subsided, but Lexie noticed that he watched her warily as though prepared to ward off a possible attack from this stranger. She took the small hand in hers and saw that the cut was a deep one at the base of the thumb. It was bleeding profusely and the blood had washed away much of the dirt from the surrounding skin.

"What's in the bottle?" she asked. "Have you some boiled water?"

"Hit's yarb water in the bottle and thar's water in the kettle. Lulie, git hit for the nurse."

Lexie wanted to say that she wasn't a nurse, but she felt that any confidence Aunt Sairey might have in her would evaporate if she admitted her unprofessional status. She saw that the rags were clean and would do as a temporary bandage. With great care she washed the cut with the boiled water, then she took up the bottle.

"I don't know," she said hesitantly. "I wish I had some iodine. Is this a disinfectant?"

Aunt Sairey nodded emphatically. "I gathered them yarbs myself and boiled 'em jest like my mother used to do. Lulie, see if thar's a cobweb somewheres. Hit stops bleedin' mighty quick or soot laid on." She bent forward toward the blackened grate to gather up a handful of soot.

Lexie suppressed a horrified exclamation. "We won't need it," she said hurriedly. "I'll tie it up tight and the bleeding will stop. It's almost stopped already." With quick hands she tore the clean cloth into strips and bound them about the wound as she had been taught in her Nurse's Aide work.

Aunt Sairey watched her doubtfully. "Soot or cobwebs is best," she said. "My mother was mighty partial to a cobweb."

"I think it will be all right," said Lexie. "There now." She touched Lem's arm and was rewarded with a shy smile.

A deep sigh came from the circle of children who had watched Lexie's ministrations. "I'm glad he warn't kilt daid," said one.

"Only kilt," said another in a tone of immense satisfaction.

"Who's kilt?" asked a voice from the door and Lexie looked up to see Debbie standing there.

"Hit's Lem," said Aunt Sairey, "but the new nurse has fixed him fine." She exhibited the neat bandage with obvious pride.

"It ought to have a disinfectant," said Lexie, not looking at Debbie. "It seemed pretty clean and I washed it and tied it up, but perhaps—" She stopped as Debbie came forward to look at her handiwork.

"How'd you learn how to make such a good bandage?" There was a note of amazement in Debbie's voice that did not escape Lexie.

"Nurse's Aide." Lexie spoke briefly. "I had two years of it."

Debbie glanced at her and smiled. "Mrs. Breckinridge will be right glad to know that. A courier with Nurse's Aide trainin' can be real useful around here. I tell you, Aunt Sairey, why don't you send Lulie out on the road, and when Miss Payne comes back, she can ask her to come in and put somethin' on this cut. I don't have a medical kit with me."

This plan was adopted and Lulie scampered importantly from the room to take up her post. The two girls prepared to leave and Aunt Sairey thanked Lexie with a few dignified words. "We are mighty grateful," she said. "Hit war real clever to help Lem so."

"Clever?" Lexie sounded surprised.

"That means generous," said Debbie smiling. "Good-by, Aunt Sairey. Miss Payne will stop by real soon."

When the girls had mounted they turned to wave at the group on the porch. "Aunt Sairey's right marvelous, isn't she?" said Debbie, as they rode down the trail.

Lexie only nodded. She longed to ask where Debbie had found Cham and to make some explanation or apology for his escape. But short of a detailed account of her reasons

for blaming her carelessness on the children, she could think of nothing to say. Perhaps silence was best, but she ought to thank Debbie for catching the runaway. "I'm—I'm sorry he got away," she mumbled, when they were safely down the steep hill that led from the yard.

Debbie looked at her and did not reply for an instant. Lexie wondered miserably if she, too, knew the truth about Cham's escape. Then Debbie shrugged her shoulders in a way that showed she was not prepared to discuss the matter. "No harm done, I reckon," she said.

But Lexie felt there had been harm done and knew it was her fault. She had made a fool of herself in both Debbie's and Eleanor's eyes and they knew that she had tried to escape the consequences of her own act by a deliberate falsehood. But in spite of this self-knowledge she could not find the words to confess to Debbie.

"We'll have to hustle back. It's time for tea," said Debbie, who plainly wished to change the subject. "I sure want to tell Mrs. Breckinridge we have a new Nurse's Aide. That was a right good job you did."

Lexie flushed with pleasure. "Aunt Sairey wanted to put a cobweb or some soot on the cut. Do these people do things like that often?"

"My sakes, that's nothin'. They have a heap of local cures."

Lexie was glad that the conversation had turned away from Cham and saw to it that it remained on safe topics all during the ride back to Wendover. No one mentioned the incident during tea in the Big House living room or even when the couriers and other inmates of the Garden

House were alone in their quarters that evening. Lexie was too tired to absorb much of the talk that went on among the girls; she sensed it only vaguely in a blur of weariness. Debbie and Liz, who had returned in time for supper, spent the evening mending a saddle and listening to records. Other girls drifted in and out of the room, asking questions, making plans, and discussing the multifold activities of the Service. One fact made a clear impression on Lexie and that was that Eleanor Payne had a room on the Upper Shelf; for the time being Lexie felt that she could relax. There was no Eleanor at hand to be on guard against.

But even this could not alleviate her exhaustion. She fell asleep fully clothed on her bed and was awakened by Debbie's trying to pull her boots off. A few minutes later Lexie had fumbled out of her clothes and was deeply asleep between the sheets. Her last waking memory was of the light from the kerosene lamp as it fell on Debbie's face. Debbie was writing a letter, sitting cross-legged on her bed across the room. The faint scratch of her pen, the distant murmur of the river, and the rustle of the wind in the trees outside the window were Lexie's lullaby. Beacon Street and Mark might be very far away, but Lexie was too tired to think of them now.

She was awakened next morning by the sound of voices in the corridor outside her door. Lexie sat up in bed with a jerk and for a moment could not remember that she had ever before seen the tumbled collection of clothing on the floor, the desk with its heap of papers and records, and the broken bridle hanging over a chair. Then the flooding

sunshine from the window lighted up the muddy boots that lay on the floor by her bed and Lexie remembered. She was at Wendover; the muddy boots were hers and this room belonged to Debbie and herself. A little groan escaped her as she got stiffly out of bed to stand huddled with cold on the icy floor. Her back felt as though a thousand needles were jabbing at it and Lexie remembered her rough ride up Hurricane Creek.

A sharp knock fell on the door and Liz's curly head appeared around its edge. "Hi, good morning! Good, you're up! Sleep well?" Liz sounded as brisk and cheerful as ever and her smile was as infectious.

Lexie laughed and shivered at the same moment. "I don't know. I was dead to the world."

"I should say you were. Debbie and I tried to wake you up about four this morning. Abby had a delivery call and we thought you'd like to go along. Debbie went. She might not be back until noon, so you and I will have the horses to do by ourselves."

Liz, with the quick movement that characterized all she did, disappeared before Lexie could reply to this astonishing piece of information. Her chief reaction was one of vast relief that she had been too sound asleep to be awakened. The very thought of riding the rough trails or through the waters of the creeks at night sent a shiver that was not due to cold down her back. It would have been unthinkable, a ghastly experience that nothing could have forced her to undertake. Let Debbie go with Abby on night calls; if there was any way to get out of it, Lexie decided that she would do so.

Immediately after breakfast Liz set briskly to work grooming and watering the horses, which had already been brought out into the sunshine. She seemed to expect Lexie to work along with her, as though she were quite confident of her ability to do a good job. Lexie wondered, as she took a brush from the tackroom, if Debbie's little fiction that she had "groomed" Jason was responsible for Liz's attitude. Feeling that Cham, in spite of his nervous heels, was the least likely to look upon her as a stranger, she began brushing his forequarters. Most of yesterday's mud had been removed the previous evening, but traces of it lingered and he had improved his night's rest by rolling in the sawdust and loose hay of his stall. His winter coat was beginning to shed, but great patches of long matted hair remained and these were thick with sawdust and hay. Lexie worked conscientiously, trying not to see the condition of his hind quarters and back legs. She would have to do them, there was no getting out of it, but she put off the evil moment as long as possible.

"He's practically polished behind the ears," said Liz at last. "Better finish him up." There was a note of impatience in her voice, as though she could not bear to see anyone moving more slowly than she.

Lexie saw then that Liz had done two horses while she was working on the less dangerous half of Cham's anatomy. She sighed and moved slowly toward his heels. Standing well away from him, she dabbed gingerly at his flank. Cham shifted toward her and Lexie leaped back.

"I—I—" Lexie sought desperately for some plausible explanation that would make Liz see that it was impracti-

cable for her to approach Cham's heels again. There was none; she knew it before the idea was fully formed in her thoughts. At that moment Liz appeared from behind Cham. Lexie saw that she was astonished to find her still standing where she had last seen her. But she merely thrust something under Lexie's nose.

"Here!" It was a small steel instrument that looked like an overgrown icepick. "Get the mud out of his hoofs with this. I'll show you."

Stooping down, Liz lifted one of Cham's forelegs and with a few deft motions flicked the caked mud from between his shoe and the frog of his foot. "Here, you try it now."

She handed the pick to Lexie with obvious reluctance. It was plain that she longed to finish the job herself but realized that she must instruct Lexie in all phases of the horses' care.

For a second Lexie wanted to refuse pointblank. Then in a confusion of memory she recalled the mistakes, excuses, and evasions that had studded her first day at Wendover. If she was to stay on as a courier, if she wanted to show Mark that she could stand on her own feet and prove herself as capable as Eleanor Payne, she would have to begin sometime. She would have to start now. Lexie took the pick and made a snatch at Cham's other forefoot.

Cham's foot remained rooted to the ground. His head swung round and he seemed to look at her as though daring her to try it again. Lexie took a deep breath and set her lips in a straight line of determination. She grabbed his fetlock and to her amazement Cham's foot came up obe-

diently. Resting it on one knee she made a few hasty jabs at the mud and bits of hay that clogged his hoof. Fortunately most of the mud fell out in one piece and the rest was sufficiently loosened to come out easily. Lexie released Cham's foot and straightened up to look at Liz, feeling that this time she deserved a word of praise.

It was not slow in coming. Liz nodded at her with a quick motion of her curly head. "Good work! I wish you could see how some of the new couriers do that. They're scared to death. Now finish him up while I do King." Liz, who obviously took a professional pride in her work with the horses, was soon so absorbed in grooming King that she even neglected to talk.

Lexie let herself relax somewhat. If other couriers had been "scared to death" as Liz claimed, she wondered how her feeling could best be described. But Liz's encouragement lent new strength to her resolve to prove her competency. Remembering Debbie's advice to be firm with the horses and show who was master, she spoke sternly to Cham each time he shifted away from her brush. Several times she pushed at him with her shoulder and was amazed to see that he apparently bore no resentment against her for her action. She finished grooming him in half the time it had taken to do his forequarters and even combed the long matted hair of his tail with a coarse metal comb. She watched Liz do King's rear hoofs and, by clamping the hoof between her knees, finished up Cham's in the same way. As she worked she forced herself to remember that Cham couldn't kick if one of his hind legs was off the ground; it was a comforting thought.

Miss Pat was the only horse left to be groomed when Miss Freeman called to Liz from the Garden House.

"Liz, can you ride up to the Left Fork of Camp Creek and tell Burt Jordon that the part for his plow is waiting for him in Hyden? A call just came through and I said we'd get the message to him. On the way back you might stop at Cassie Potter's and get that maltese kitten she promised me."

"Okay, I'll ride King. He needs exercise, now his hoof's all cured. Don't you, you beautiful baby?" Liz stopped on her way to the tackroom long enough to rub the nose of the handsome bay horse. It was plain that he was her favorite, and Lexie, who had admired his clean lines and fine intelligent head the moment she saw him, rather envied Liz her ride. It was a beautiful day, warmer than the day before and with an even more pronounced promise of spring in the air.

"You do Miss Pat, and maybe Debbie will be back to show you about cleaning tack. You could begin on it anyway. Just oil the leather and wash the mud from the stirrups for a starter." Liz spoke as though the job were one that any child could do.

A few minutes later Lexie was left alone with the horses. She found Miss Pat amenable to the brush and comb and soon finished grooming her. One patch of mud on her back was particularly stubborn and it was not until Lexie softened it with water that it came off. Then Lexie saw that the hair was worn away beneath the spot where the mud had been and that the skin showed signs of a festering sore. Lexie peered at it for a moment, then decided that

she would tell Liz about it when she came back. Miss Pat seemed quite unconcerned about it, even when Lexie touched it tentatively to note the horse's reaction. Liz would know what to do, if any treatment was necessary.

When Eleanor appeared, ready to start on her morning rounds, Lexie had a horse ready for her. The two girls said very little beyond a few words concerning the horses and the beauty of the day. Whenever they were alone Lexie had a mortal dread of Eleanor's mentioning Mark. She had no wish to discuss him with the girl whom she knew he admired and toward whom he might cherish a stronger feeling. The memory of Eleanor's reference to her as "Mark's little friend" still rankled, and Lexie seldom ceased wondering what Mark had told Eleanor about her. Though she recognized Eleanor's good qualities, her skill as a nurse, her tremendous efficiency, Lexie could not make herself like her rival. Now she helped Eleanor secure her saddlebags, working quickly so as to hasten her departure. She watched her ride away with a mixture of relief and envy. It was nice not to have to be on her guard in Eleanor's presence, but it would be wonderful to be starting for a morning's ride instead of facing the task of cleaning a heap of muddy leather.

She found the saddle soap and neatsfoot oil and sat down in the patch of sunshine in the tackroom door to clean a bridle. She soon discovered that there was a certain amount of satisfaction in making the leather shine and decided to surprise Debbie by cleaning the saddles as well. Making an oozy paste with a liberal mixture of oil and saddle soap, she smeared it generously over the seat of one of

the saddles and began rubbing at it vigorously. The paste did not seem to sink into the leather as she had thought it might, but Lexie worked on, thinking of Debbie's pleasure when she returned to see what she had accomplished.

It was just before noon when Debbie and Abby rode into the driveway. They looked tired, but their voices as they called to Lexie were as fresh as though they had had a long night's sleep. Lexie caught a note of exhilaration that was unusual in Abby's deliberate voice as she said, 'Caught an eight-pound boy. Mandy's sixth and everything's fine.'

"Abby let me help," said Debbie. "There wasn't even a tiny bit of kerosene for the lamp, so I held the flashlight for her, and got the water boiled, and handed out the supplies." Debbie's voice betrayed the pride of her accomplishment.

Lexie had a mental picture of the scene in the darkened cabin and wondered why Debbie should consider it such a privilege to assist in such an operation. The very idea of helping to bring a new life into the world under such hazardous circumstances was beyond Lexie's powers of imagination. All she realized was that it was not something that she would look upon as a privilege.

"You get the next chance to go out on delivery call," said Debbie, as she slid from her horse. "It's right interestin' and I sure love to go."

Lexie did not commit herself to a reply. When the next call came there would be time enough to think of an excuse for not going with Abby. "Let me unsaddle for you," he said. "You two must be dead."

Debbie shook her head so vigorously that her light curls danced on her forehead. "We sure are, but I'm not goin' to bed till after lunch. I just can't bear to miss a meal. All the tack cleaned?" She leaned down to inspect Lexie's work and Lexie heard her stifle an exclamation.

"What's wrong?" Lexie demanded anxiously.

"The saddles," said Debbie. She hesitated, then said frankly, "We don't oil the seats of the saddles. It comes off on your clothes and makes a real fine mess of 'em."

Lexie flushed, wishing she had thought of this obvious fact herself. "I never thought," she said in a crestfallen tone. "I'll rub it off."

"I don't mind helpin'." Debbie sat down beside her and began rubbing at the saddle seat with a clean dry cloth. "Abby's goin' to catch a few hours' sleep, then she has a couple of calls up the Right Fork of Camp. Want to go with her?"

Lexie nodded, her spirits rising at the prospect of the ride.

"The only horse handy for you will be Miss Pat. Cham has to be shod this afternoon and Abby can ride Orestes. Miss Pat's a right good horse, even if she does let on she's scared witless by mules."

The thought of the afternoon's ride drove from Lexie's mind all recollection of the small skin abrasion on Miss Pat's back. Even when she saddled Miss Pat after lunch she did not notice it again. Miss Pat made no objection to the saddle and did nothing to help Lexie remember that small patch of festering skin. Lexie whistled to herself as she

tightened the girth, her spirits as light as the soft breeze that blew up from the river.

Abby was ready to go shortly after three o'clock. She seemed quite refreshed by her short sleep and nodded tranquilly at Lexie, who was waiting for her on the Garden House steps. Abby was so much quieter and more easy-going than some of the other girls at Wendover that Lexie found her presence oddly comforting. She said very little, and seemed to make no demands on anyone, but there was something in her square face with its steady dark eyes that inspired confidence. Lexie was sure that she was a good nurse and one who could handle almost any situation that came her way.

"The horses are all saddled. I did them myself." Lexie could not keep the note of pride from her voice.

Abby smiled affably as she tossed her saddlebags over her horse's back. "Where's Liz?"

"She took the jeep to Beech Fork and Debbie's sound asleep. She said she'd get tea if we weren't back in time."

The ride to the mouth of Camp Creek, which was beyond Hurricane Creek, was longer than Lexie had anticipated but all the more delightful for that very reason. The tumbling waters of the creeks and river had already become familiar to her, and Lexie let Miss Pat carry her through them with few of the qualms that had beset her the day before. Miss Pat had an easy, steady gait that promised safety in its very surety. It was easy to follow after Abby, letting her pick the course while Miss Pat did the rest of the work. Lexie gave herself up to a full enjoyment

of the crisp March sunshine and the delight of being on horseback.

Camp Creek branched off into a right and left fork a short way from the Middle Fork. They passed a sawmill at the fork and took the road to the right along a logging track that formed an excellent riding surface. Several times they passed people on the road, some of them on mules and many walking. Lexie followed Abby's example and called a greeting to each one, feeling very much a part of the Frontier Nursing Service as she did so. These people seemed to accept her as a member of the Service group and Lexie hoped that none of them suspected how new she was to the life. As Debbie had warned her, Miss Pat had an antipathy to mules and kept Lexie busy holding her back each time they passed one of the plodding animals.

"She's worse than usual," commented Abby, as they passed a particularly depressed-looking mule on a turn in the road. She watched Lexie struggling to suppress Miss Pat's dancing steps which threatened to carry both horse and rider over the edge of the trail to the creek bed below. "Are you all right?" Abby did not seem particularly worried and spoke as calmly as usual.

Lexie nodded grimly as she pulled Miss Pat back to the road. "She does act awfully jumpy," she said. But even Miss Pat's unusual nervousness did not make Lexie remember the sore beneath the saddle blanket. Nothing in her experience with horses had taught her to care for them. The stablemen had always done that, and Lexie had known nothing of any ills or misfortunes that might be-

fall the horses she rode at home. As a consequence the sore on Miss Pat's back had not impressed itself forcibly on her mind.

Abby had two houses to visit, both health calls, which required a rather lengthy stay in each case. Both these houses were less prosperous in appearance than Aunt Sairey's abode, and Lexie, as she waited outside, wondered once again how people could bear to live in such bleak surroundings. Lexie, whose duty it was to hold Abby's horse, wondered if she would ever be able to take such places for granted as Abby seemed to do.

"Didn't like to let you come in with me," said Abby, as they rode away from the second house. "Both these cases look like flu and there's no use exposing you to it." Abby spoke as though the flu or any other illness to which mortal flesh might fall heir was nothing that merited undue worry or excitement.

Lexie almost said that she was glad not to have to enter either of the houses, but she held her tongue in time. She knew that she must overcome this feeling and accept conditions as she found them. None of the Service people appeared to feel as she did about these houses and people and she must learn to hide her reactions.

When they rode into the stableyard at Wendover Liz was waiting to help Lexie unsaddle. It took her only a moment to note that something was wrong with Miss Pat. The saddle sore caught her eye as soon as she removed the blanket and Lexie heard her exclamation of dismay. In that instant Lexie remembered that she had meant to tell Liz about the sore spot. Why hadn't she thought of it at

lunch? Why hadn't she remembered before she took Miss Pat out that afternoon? No wonder Miss Pat had been nervous, she thought miserably.

"How could it have gotten there so quickly?" asked Liz. She sounded almost angry, for anything that concerned the welfare of her beloved horses touched her nearly. "Didn't you notice anything when you were saddling up?"

Lexie opened her mouth to confess her forgetfulness, but no words came. She saw Liz glance at her, but the next minute she had disappeared into the tackroom for lotions and ointment. The moment for admission had come and gone. Now Lexie knew that she could never bring herself to tell that she had noticed the sore and been careless enough to forget it again. Liz would be the last person to understand such neglect.

"The worst of it is," said Liz, as she dabbed ointment on the sore, "that you and Debbie are going on Lower Rounds tomorrow and I was going to send Miss Pat along as a relief horse. Well, I'll just have to send Orestes, but it certainly messes up our plans. Whoa, Pat baby." Her quick voice was soft as she soothed the nervous animal.

"Rounds?" Lexie jumped at the word thankfully. Anything to get Liz's mind off Miss Pat's condition.

"All the new couriers go the rounds of the nursing centers after they've been here a few days. Lower Rounds means Confluence, Bowlingtown, and Brutus. You'll have to start from Hyden and go over Hospital Hill to Confluence, because the river's so high. It's a long ride, almost twenty-five miles and pretty rugged. We're sending you

rather early, but they need a relief horse at Confluence. Poor Miss Pat. How I wish someone had seen this thing in time."

Lexie saw Debbie waving to her from the Garden House and escaped before she ran the risk of exposing her carelessness to Liz. She knew she had been guilty of a fault that might prove far more serious than her previous errors. Why hadn't she told someone about Miss Pat's back when she first noticed it? To give the lame excuse now that she had just "forgotten" was unthinkable. Neither Debbie nor Liz would forget anything concerning the horses, and Lexie wanted desperately to make the other couriers think her capable of performing her duties as well as they.

"You hear the news?" shouted Debbie. Her face was flushed and her eyes alight with excitement. "We're off on rounds tomorrow sure enough. I sure hope it won't snow."

"Snow?" Lexie sounded alarmed.

Debbie shrugged away the thought of it. "I heard tell there might be. It smells mighty like it. What's ailin' Miss Pat?"

Lexie muttered a reply and went on into the Garden House. The worry about Miss Pat and her part in her misfortune added to the idea of a twenty-five mile ride in a snowstorm were all that she needed at this time to occupy her mind entirely.

CHAPTER SIX

IT was not snowing when Lexie awoke the next morning, but the sky was gray with the heavy clouds that rested on the mountain tops. The air was sharp and weighted with the chill damp of the impending storm.

"We'll sure catch it around Thousandsticks," said Debbie. "It'll be mighty tricky findin' Sally Sizemore's Branch in a snowstorm." She took a disordered heap of clothing from her bed and stuffed it carelessly into one pocket of her saddlebags.

Lexie, who was folding her shirts and underclothing in neat little bundles, watched Debbie's method of packing with a mixture of wonder and amusement. She seldom ceased marveling that Debbie could keep her possessions in such a welter of disorder and at the same time manage to look so neat and dainty herself. Almost everything about Debbie was surprising, Lexie had learned. She looked like a frail and helpless doll, yet she could do more work in a day than even Liz; she spoke in a lazy drawl, yet she was more energetic than anyone Lexie had ever known. It was

an insoluble mystery to Lexie, but right now she had more pressing problems to consider.

She had spent a restless night thinking of the trip in prospect. Everything about it seemed threatening. She was determined not to show her dread of the journey, but she had learned enough of the country to realize that it was sure to be an uncomfortable experience. The way led over the ridge behind Hyden Hospital to the Thousandsticks Road. From there they must cross another mountain that lay between Bull and Hell-for-Certain Creeks and so on to a ridge known as the Devil's Jump, down to Wilder Branch and the Possum Bend Nursing Center at Confluence. All the place names sounded forbidding in themselves, and Lexie had a vivid picture of what the Devil's Jump and Hell-for-Certain Creek must be like.

"Have you ever been this way before?" she asked with assumed carelessness.

"Just once," was Debbie's airy reply. She jammed a flashlight into the bulging saddlebags and lifted them experimentally. "They just have to balance or they bother you to death slippin' and slidin'. Don't you dare to forget your flash. Confluence is just like Wendover—nothin' but kerosene. My sakes, child, you can't wear those jodhpur boots. You just take my rubber boots, hear? and put on woolen socks or you'll catch your death."

Lexie meekly shifted her footgear and put on the bulky leather jacket Debbie handed her. The duffle bag she had sent from Boston was still unaccounted for and Lexie had been living in borrowed clothing ever since her arrival at Wendover. In that time she had realized that ap-

pearance must be sacrificed for comfort and convenience. Even the lipstick and powder that were a prime necessity at home were discarded here. There seemed so little time and need for such things in this hardy outdoor life.

Debbie hoisted her saddlebags on her slim shoulders with an easy swing of her arms and motioned Lexie to follow after her. "We're totin' extra supplies for Confluence, but Orestes can carry 'em. It sure is a sin about Miss Pat. Orestes needs more rest, but they're hollerin' for a relief horse at Confluence, so we just have to take him."

Lexie was glad that Debbie was preceding her down the stairs and could not see her face. Any mention of Miss Pat made her uneasy, for the saddle sore had not improved overnight and the horse would be out of action for several days. The time and opportunity for admitting her carelessness were gone, but it rankled in her conscience like a nettle.

"How long will we be gone?" she asked hurriedly.

"Oh, four or five days most likely. A couple of days at Confluence and a night apiece at Brutus and Bowlingtown. You be sure to watch out on the trails; it's likely you'll have to guide a guest over 'em some day."

Lexie had no time to digest this unpalatable possibility before they reached the stableyard. They found that Liz had saddled Cham and Dandy and that Orestes was attached by a lead rein to one of Dandy's saddle rings.

"You take good care of the horses now," was Liz's farewell advice. "Hope it doesn't snow; it's hard going for them in a storm."

Lexie wanted to say that she and Debbie might be at an equal disadvantage, but realized that Liz expected them to be able to cope with any such misfortune without counsel from her. Debbie also seemed prepared to meet the situation with her usual lightheartedness.

"Cham was a Confluence horse once," she said. "We'll just count on him to get us there. Bye!" She flourished her free hand in farewell and led the way out of the yard.

The five-mile ride into Hyden was slow and uneventful. They followed the highway that Lexie had driven over in the jeep and, owing to the hard road surface, were forced to walk the horses the entire way. The storm held off, but it was considerably colder when they rode up the hill to the hospital. Here they stopped for medical supplies for Confluence and to repack Lexie's saddlebags which were overweighted on one side. Nancy Edwards gave them a handful of chocolate bars as a farewell gift and Lexie felt more than ever like an explorer as they waved good-bye to her. Chocolate bars were what people who were lost in the woods ate to sustain life.

"They'll be right handy at lunch," said Debbie. "I've got a pack of sandwiches with me. We ought to reach Thousandsticks 'fore we eat."

The ridge trail behind the hospital was clearly defined but rough and rocky. In many places it dipped so sharply up and down inclines that Lexie was tempted to get off and lead Cham. Once a huge tree trunk across the path forced them into a thick underbrush to avoid it, and Lexie emerged from the detour with a tear in her jeans and a long scratch along one cheek. It seemed hours to Lexie

before Debbie pulled Dandy to a halt on the crest of a hill and sat staring at the rock-strewn path that plunged down the mountainside before her. The leafless trees thinned here, and all about her Lexie could see nothing but heaped and tumbled hills, pocked with slabs of gray rock and scattered trees. It was a lonely vista; not a house or column of smoke showed to prove a sign of human habitation. A sudden blast of cold wind stirred the dry leaves underfoot and sighed through the bare branches of the trees. Lexie shivered.

"You know where we are, don't you?" she asked nervously.

Debbie shrugged. "I'm lookin' for a dead tree that's the landmark here, but with all the trees bare I'm not just sure of myself. Here, you take Orestes for a while. I'll ride ahead a piece." She handed Lexie the lead rein and urged Dandy down the steep incline. "I'll holler out if I see the tree," she called.

Lexie took the rein and tied it to a saddle ring. Her fingers were stiff with cold and it was difficult to secure the rein firmly. Fortunately both Orestes and Cham stood quietly, but in the few minutes before Debbie's call came, Lexie wondered if any human being had ever felt more alone than she. There was something in the stark scene about her that was cold in itself, and the increasing wind only added to her discomfort of body and spirit. Debbie had disappeared entirely among the trees at the foot of the incline and Lexie was sure that something had happened to her. She pictured herself riding back to the hospital for help and tried to remember the way they had come. It

was all a blur of rocks, trees, and mud; she would get lost beyond a doubt.

Debbie's voice calling from somewhere below acted on Lexie like a waft of warm wind. She sounded quite unconcerned; obviously nothing had happened to her. Pulling at Orestes' rein to urge him along, Lexie let Cham find his way down the hill. There was little she could do to help him, but he seemed quite willing to undertake the task unassisted. Twice he stumbled, but he recovered immediately. Like all the Service horses he was as surefooted as a mule and no terrain or torrent presented any difficulty to him. Orestes slid along behind, tossing his head and evidently wishing there was no lead rein to impede a hastier descent of the slope.

Debbie was waiting by a huge rock that jutted out over the trail. She greeted Lexie with a casual wave of one hand. "Can't for my life find the tree, but I recollect this rock. Now we've got to get down to Asher Branch, then on Wolf Pen to Bull Creek. Orestes behavin' himself?"

Lexie nodded. She wanted to show Debbie that she could ride through these trails leading a horse as readily as anyone. Though Orestes followed willingly enough, he had a disconcerting way of jerking his head suddenly. Each time he did so, Lexie was sure the rein would come loose.

The trail grew clearer as they progressed. Occasionally they passed a lonely house and waved to the women and children who crowded to the door to watch them. These houses seemed unutterably forlorn to Lexie; they were widely separated and, bleak in appearance. It was as

though they had been dumped down in these deserted hills from the skies and had had no contact with outside civilization since.

"They're not so lonesome as they look," said Debbie in answer to a question from Lexie. "The Thousandsticks clinic is over yonder and there are small stores handy, and the school, too. Oh, here's Wolf Pen. The clinic's off yonder." She gestured to the left.

Wolf Pen proved to be a small but rapidly flowing creek that hurtled over rocks and fallen trees in a white swirl of water. Lexie held her breath as Debbie turned Dandy off the trail and guided him along the creek bed.

"Trail just stops here and we follow the creek," said Debbie over her shoulder. She spoke as though it were the most natural thing in the world to find a road through the tumbling water.

Lexie didn't bother to reply. With the water up to Cham's knees and Orestes floundering along behind her, she had all she could do to stay in the saddle. She stared down at the churning water, her head whirling. Once she felt herself bending toward the water as though drawn by a magnet. It was only then that she remembered Liz's warning not to watch the waters of a creek or river. She forced her eyes up and fixed them on Cham's pointed ears. It was a relief to see Debbie turn Dandy out of the creek and urge him up a steep bank to the trail once more.

"Water's sure higher than it is up river," said Debbie. "Hope Hell-for-Certain isn't actin' up. Gettin' hungry?"

Lexie realized then that she was ravenous. She had been in the saddle almost four hours and breakfast at Wendover

seemed to have taken place in another lifetime. "I could eat a horse," she confessed.

"Well, don't dare start on Cham. We'll sure need him. Let's see. We'll hit the Thousandsticks Road in a minute. It'll be a likely place to stop."

A short time later they emerged from the trail that followed the winding course of Wolf Pen Creek and found themselves on a wide dirt road. The road was an excellent riding surface and they made good time along its curving course. The hills were higher here and in Lexie's eyes more gaunt and barren than those around Wendover. The road wound among them, following the tortuous twists of the enfolding mountains.

"We'll come on Sally Sizemore's Branch a little mite farther on. Let's eat on this rock." Debbie pointed to a flat rock beside the road and slipped out of the saddle as she spoke. "My sakes, I'm stiff and cold enough to die." She glanced at the sky as she took a package of sandwiches from the pocket of her saddlebags. "We're goin' to catch it sure as you're alive," she muttered.

Lexie stamped her feet to restore some measure of circulation, realizing for the first time that they were almost entirely numb. She tied Orestes and Cham to the dead branch of a near-by tree, her fingers moving awkwardly with the stiff leather. Debbie's prophecy about the looming storm only added to her distress. She was cold, cramped, and hungry, and Confluence was a good four hours' ride away. A mental image of the big fireplace in the Wendover living room flashed into her mind and she groaned.

"Just you wait till we get to Confluence," said Debbie comfortingly. "Wilma Mason is head nurse there and she'll sure have the fattened calf sizzlin' on the fire. Here's a tongue sandwich."

Four sandwiches and a bar of chocolate made life seem worth while again and Lexie was prepared to believe that she could live until they reached Confluence. A brisk run up and down the road warmed her and she felt quite herself as she climbed into Cham's saddle.

"Do you want I should lead Orestes?" asked Debbie, as they started out.

Lexie shook her head. "You concentrate on finding the trail," she said. "He's all right and he likes Cham better than Dandy. I noticed he kept nipping at Dandy when you were leading him."

But Debbie did not reply. She was staring off to the left of the road and a moment later turned into what appeared to be a dense undergrowth. If Lexie had not been watching her, she might have missed the steep trail entirely. They scrambled up an incline, following a faint track, and came out on a bare hilltop that immediately plunged downward toward a small creek. Just as Lexie turned Cham in Dandy's footsteps, a snowflake touched her cheek. A minute later the world had turned into a white swirl of snow, so thick that she could barely make out the dark figure of Dandy just ahead.

"It's here for sure," shouted Debbie. "Just you stick close, hear? Cham can find his way."

Lexie opened her mouth to reply, but a gust of wind took her breath away and she shut it immediately. It took

all her powers of concentration to keep her eyes on Debbie and Dandy without bothering to talk. By pulling her visored cap well down she was able to keep some of the snow out of her eyes, and the rest of the work she trusted to Cham. He seemed quite unconcerned with the snow and plodded along with his head down as though watching the trail. When they reached the creek bed the ground was already white.

"We follow along here and then over the ridge to Big Fork," called Debbie. She turned Dandy into the water and a second later disappeared behind the curtain of snow.

Lexie urged Cham on, her muscles tightening with a sudden dread. If she lost sight of Debbie in this white world, she would be desolate indeed. From time to time Debbie called back to her, her voice as cheerful as usual. But to Lexie coming along behind it was like some disembodied spirit, comforting but unreal. She could not see Debbie; it was only the echo of her words that reached her.

She saw Dandy's hoofmarks on the bank to the right and followed after them along a narrow path beside the creek. Debbie's voice reached her just ahead and Lexie shouted a hoarse reply. Somehow it seemed to her that Debbie was calling directions, saying something about a turn in the trail. She dug her heels into Cham's sides and yanked at Orestes' rein. To her surprise he did not respond as usual, but held back, jerking his head more violently than he had before. She glanced back at him and to her dismay saw that his saddlebags had slipped off to one side and were dangling near the ground.

“Debbie, Debbie!” Lexie’s voice was loud with urgency. “Wait, wait a minute!”

A wail of wind carried back a faint response, bringing with it a thicker cloud of snow. It was Debbie’s voice, she was sure. She had heard and was waiting just ahead. Lexie climbed stiffly out of the saddle and beat her hands together. She was shaking with the cold; her feet were mere blocks of ice and her hands nothing but stiffened thumbs. Lifting the heavy saddlebags, tightening Orestes’ saddle girth, and restrapping the leather thongs seemed an endless task. More than once she glanced hurriedly over her shoulder as she worked. Why hadn’t Debbie turned back to see what was the matter? She must know that something had happened. That was her voice she had heard; it must have been.

By the time Lexie had mounted Cham once more a good five minutes had gone by since she had first called out to Debbie. The snow had completely hidden Dandy’s footprints and only the white trail, winding between the rocks beside the creek, showed Lexie which way she must go. Cham stepped forward confidently, evidently quite certain of his course. Once more Lexie began to shout, her voice high with a mounting alarm. The wind was blowing toward her, tossing gusts of thick, wet snow in her mouth and eyes. Perhaps Debbie had not heard her after all. She might have gone on, thinking Lexie was right behind her. Lexie was screaming now, forcing her voice forward against the wind and snow.

The trail reached a flat piece of ground, a wide marshy area that stretched like a trackless wasteland before her.

There was no mark or path to show which way Debbie had gone. Suddenly Lexie stopped screaming. She knew Debbie had not heard her and could not hear her now. For a second, as Cham stopped to snatch at a withered tuft of grass, Lexie sat perfectly still in the saddle. She must think, must decide what to do. The trail was somewhere ahead; there was no spot where Debbie could have turned off before now. She clucked at Cham and he moved forward. A vague path began to show on the ground, a deeper indentation on the flat ground. Lexie's heart lifted. She was on the trail after all. Cham's ears went forward and he quickened his pace. Everything was all right. She would find Debbie waiting for her at any moment.

Then just before her Lexie saw a fork in the path. As clearly as she could see in the drifting snow, one path led up a hillside to the left and the other continued along the stretch of marshland. Cham hesitated and seemed to be waiting for a signal. Lexie shut her eyes and tried her best to picture the map of the area that Debbie had showed her the night before. She remembered that she must go up a hill from Sally Sizemore's Branch, pass a cemetery on the ridge, and then descend to a creek known as Big Fork. Big Fork was her present objective and she must go uphill first to reach it.

She jerked Cham to the left and a moment later was scrambling up the rocky, slippery path. Great boulders crowded out over the trail, some of them looming overhead as though prepared to crash down on top of her. But the path twisted through them, showing clearly as a white ribbon among the dark rocks. Ahead of her Lexie could

hear the roar and rush of water. She must be coming to another creek branch. There was no sign of Dandy's footsteps, but the snow would account for that. This must be the way, if she were to reach the ridge.

The path narrowed as she reached the top of the steep rise and a moment later disappeared entirely in a wilderness of tumbled, jagged rocks. Beyond them was a white veil of water, a foaming cataract that leaped down into a deep gorge of rocks. There was no way around this barrier of rocks and water; she had come to a dead end in the trail. Lexie yanked Cham to a halt and stared with unbelieving eyes at the roaring flood of water and at the black rocks that loomed about her. It was a terrifying sight, threatening and implacable in its power. Lexie drew a long, shaky breath and fought to keep the tears from her eyes. This was no time for tears, no time for fear. She must go back to the fork in the trail and try the other path. In any case she must get away from these overhanging rocks. They seemed almost alive, as though crouching there waiting to spring on her. The water was like the roar of wild beasts in Lexie's imagination. She must get away before both rocks and water overwhelmed her.

The wild scramble down the steep trail was an experience that was never very clear to Lexie afterward. She remembered shouting at Cham to make him go faster and pulling at Orestes' rein in a frantic effort to drag him along after her. They reached the bottom of the hill in a matter of moments and the fading sound of the waterfall was comfort in itself. She had escaped; the rocks were behind her and could not harm her now. With more confidence Lexie

turned Cham along the other fork and called to him to hurry. Debbie must be just ahead; she would be wild with worry by now.

The trail led endlessly through the flat marsh, winding in and out among tufts of grasses and thicker growths of underbrush. Occasionally the snow, which fell more thinly now, stopped entirely and Lexie could see nothing ahead of her but the marshland and the folding hills which mounted on all sides of her. Somewhere among those hills was Debbie and the trail that led to Big Fork. Whatever she did she must find that trail or perish in the sodden cold of this monotonous white world.

The trail left the flat ground suddenly and turned up a hill directly before her. The cemetery must be on top of this hill. Lexie's spirits lifted once more. No one could say that she had not kept her wits about her. She had fought down her fears and her reward was just ahead. Cham stepped forward briskly and Lexie let him find his way up the sloping trail. The snow had thinned to an occasional drift of flakes now, but the wind had increased and blew in a chill, steady blast that went straight to the marrow of Lexie's bones. She was so stiff that all feeling had gone from her hands and they held the reins only because they were cramped in a position to do so.

Halfway up the incline the trail branched once more, the left fork following the contour of the hill and the right leading straight up. Lexie yanked Cham to a halt and groaned. The rising hope that had warmed her spirits in the last few minutes faded as though it had never been born. The snow, which had fallen to a depth of almost two

inches, completely covered any marks in the trail. If Debbie and Dandy had come this way, she had no means of knowing which fork they had taken. But she couldn't just stay where she was. She pulled Cham to the left and shook the reins as a signal for him to go forward. But Cham shook his head and refused to move.

"Go on!" shouted Lexie, her voice hoarse with exasperation. A sudden fear that Cham would refuse to obey her, that he might take it into his head to turn back or run away, lent desperation to her words. She dug her heels into his sides and gave his neck a sharp slap with the end of the reins. Cham only ducked his head and stayed where he was.

Lexie felt the sob gathering in her throat and swallowed hard. "You go on!" she repeated. "Please, Cham. Hurry!"

Cham lifted his head suddenly and seemed to be listening. Then, before Lexie was quite aware of his intention, he wheeled around and plunged up the right-hand fork, determination in every step he took. Lexie pulled at the reins, calling to him to stop, but Cham had the bit between his teeth and ignored both her words and her tugs at his reins. Then Lexie gave up. What was the use? She had no power to stop Cham; he had chosen the course and, right or wrong, she must go where he led. Even Orestes seemed to have deserted her, for he came along behind, moving with the same confidence that Cham showed.

On top of the ridge Lexie succeeded in pulling Cham to a halt. At that moment the snow ceased and, in the leaden quiet of the white world about her, Lexie heard a shout.

It seemed to come from somewhere below, beyond the slope that led downward from the ridge.

"Debbie!" Lexie's voice cracked and broke.

"Lexie, is that you for sure? Just you stay there and don't dare move." There was no doubt now that it was Debbie, and for a moment Lexie permitted herself the luxury of a few grateful tears. She was safe, she had found the trail at last and nothing could happen to her now.

She wiped her eyes fiercely and forced herself to be calm. It would never do to let Debbie see her cry. She must never let anyone know of those minutes of terror and despair that had made this last hour so miserable. Then Dandy's head appeared over the crest of the hill before her and a moment later Debbie was waving at her.

"For the land's sakes, child, whatever in the world happened?" Debbie sounded angry, but the relief in her eyes and voice showed that it was anxiety that colored her words. "What possessed you to stop? I was certain sure you were just behind me and I've been just about out of my senses!"

Lexie described her halt to fix Orestes' saddlebags and how she had thought Debbie had heard her call. She said nothing of her fears, but made a lively account of her trip to the waterfall and her eventual discovery of the right trail. "As a matter of fact," she said, "it was Cham who found the path. I wanted to go to the left down there, but he wouldn't and led me up here. Oh, there's the cemetery." She caught sight of a few straggling headstones in a fenced area to her right. "Cham knew the way after all. I should have let him lead me the whole way." She reached forward

and rewarded Cham with a pat on the neck. He ducked his head, but Lexie imagined that even this gesture showed that he was pleased with himself.

Debbie drew a long breath. "A fine mess of a courier I am," she muttered. "It was my fault. I never should have let you out of my sight one little second, but I was mighty sure you were just behind me till I got to the middle of that marsh. I waited for you and even went back, but the snow got me in such a fix, I thought I'd sure enough missed you and you'd gone ahead. I'm mighty sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," declared Lexie. "It was just a mistake all around. Where are we now and how far to Confluence?"

Debbie smiled at her and Lexie knew that she was pleased with her for taking the incident as she did. The knowledge warmed Lexie, and much of the horror of the last hour began to evaporate. In the time she had been with the Service she felt there had been little reason for anyone to show approval of her, and Debbie's reaction was a comfort.

"Big Fork's just down the hill, then we cross Hell-for-Certain. The trail's clear, but it's sure to take us a couple of hours with this pesky snow. It's a blessin' it's stopped, but the ground's sure to be mush. Here, I'll take Orestes now. You must be mighty sick of him."

Lexie made no protest, but handed over the lead rein and followed after the two horses. She rode within inches of Orestes' heels, determined not to lose sight of her guide for a moment.

Big Fork proved to be a wild tumble of water with a

trail that led first on one side of the creek and then on the other. The horses were in the water almost as much as on the trail, scrambling over and around rocks in a way that was little short of miraculous to Lexie. By the time they reached the mouth of the creek where it joined Hell-for-Certain, Lexie was quite sure that Cham could climb the Matterhorn if he wished. Hell-for-Certain was a wide creek, very nearly approaching the size of a river in Lexie's opinion. It somewhat belied its name at the ford where the horses crossed, for the passage was clear of rocks even though the water touched the saddle girths.

Lexie was too tired to take in much of the rest of the trip. The girls spoke very little, for both were cold and anxious to get to Confluence. The Devil's Jump was a high hill beyond the creek, dangerous only for the steepness of the trail and the depth of the slick mud underfoot. They came down the other side and in a short time struck a small creek that led into Wilder Branch.

"Almost home," said Debbie, when they reached Wilder.

Lexie only nodded. Her face was numb with cold and she wondered if her fingers would ever move again. Long ago her feet had ceased to respond to any sensation and she was sure they were frozen. They came upon a scattering of houses on Wilder Creek, the largest settlement they had seen during all their trip. Most of the houses were small cabins, but they looked well kept and the sloping fields showed evidence of care. Debbie seemed to know many of the inhabitants along the way, for she waved and called to them by name.

"I've been here a lot," she told Lexie. "Wilma's a right good friend of mine. The Possum Bend Center at Confluence is just about the last center that's plain horseback country. You won't hardly see a road, and it's a mile anyway to the post office. That's just about all there is to Confluence—this little bit post office and a store hitched on. I'm right fond of Confluence."

Lexie's chief hope was that Possum Bend had a large and roaring fireplace. It was all she needed to make the nursing center attractive to her. They rounded a bend in the trail and just ahead she saw a mountain cabin, smaller and less prosperous-looking than those they had recently passed. A woman stood on the tumbledown porch, staring at them as though she had not seen a human being in countless days. Something in the slope of her thin shoulders and the color of her soft light hair was familiar to Lexie. When the woman moved forward, as though to get a better look at the riders, Lexie caught a glimpse of her ungainly figure and knew where she had seen her. It was Mrs. Corey, the woman she had seen on the bus, the woman who was expecting a child and had seemed so frightened. So she had reached Confluence safely and this dreary cabin was her new home. The small boy, half-hidden behind his mother's skirts, confirmed her knowledge.

Lexie lifted her hand impulsively and called a greeting. "Howdy," she cried. "I'm glad to see you again."

Mrs. Corey stared at her, shrinking back toward the door. She made no attempt to respond and Lexie saw her hand go to her mouth in a frightened gesture. At that moment a man appeared from behind the house. He carried a

rifle in his hand and the weapon added to the fierce independence of his every motion. It was Mr. Corey, the stern, unbending man whom Lexie had seen before. He strode to the porch, but by the time he reached it, both Mrs. Corey and the little boy had disappeared into the house. Obviously Mrs. Corey was terrified of her husband and Lexie could not blame her. He must have forbidden her to speak to strangers and was evidently prepared to see that she obeyed him. There was unfriendliness and resentment in every line of his face and Lexie was glad when another turn in the path hid the cabin from sight.

"He looks a right pleasant gentleman," commented Debbie. "Seems likely he'd shoot that rifle any time he took it into his head. How did you get acquainted?"

Lexie explained briefly. The encounter had depressed her and she did not want to discuss the misery of Mrs. Corey. Perhaps the nurse at Confluence knew about her and was ready to help her. It was not her concern, but the image of Mrs. Corey's pale, unhappy face haunted her imagination.

A short time later a shout from Debbie drove all thought of the Coreys from her mind. They had left the creek and crossed a field when Debbie cried out. "Here we are! That's Confluence!"

Lexie saw the pullgate and the white-painted house behind it on a slight rise of ground. Just below was the wide, swift-running water of the Middle Fork, separated from the house by a rutted dirt road and a tree-covered bank. They went through the gate and up the drive to the yard. To the right, beyond the house, was a stable, and in the

doorway stood a girl dressed in the uniform of a frontier nurse. She was rather stocky and Lexie noticed that when she moved she very nearly bounced with each quick step she took. Her hair was dark, her eyes a lively black, and her round pleasant face was tanned to a smooth and even brown. She reminded Lexie of a plump brownie or an elf, and the gaiety of her wide smile served to increase the resemblance.

"Wilma!" Debbie tumbled off her horse and hurled herself at her friend. "We're tired to death and starvin' hungry and just frozen to ice. But I'm right glad to see you! This here is Lexie Littleton and—"

But Wilma let her get no further. "You two get right into the house." Her voice was thin and high, a surprising contrast to her rounded figure. "No, you can't tack the horses and you can't feed them. Timmy and I'll do that. Scoot now! Supper's ready in ten minutes and you need a thawing out." Wilma's voice might be small, but there was a note of authority in it that forbade argument.

Timmy proved to be another nurse who shouted down at them from the hayloft above the stable door. She seconded Wilma's orders and two minutes later both Debbie and Lexie were huddled before a briskly burning coal fire in the living room of the center. Lexie was conscious of the chintz-covered chairs and the sofa grouped before the fire, of a table already spread for supper and a tantalizing smell of food from the kitchen beyond. In that moment Lexie knew why Debbie loved Confluence. Its warmth and the charm of the long room seemed to reach out and take her in as though she were a welcome friend. It was

like coming home to a place that knew and loved her. Even the two dogs that sprawled on the hearth seemed to accept her without question.

Supper and the chatter of talk that accompanied it passed in a blur to Lexie. She heard Debbie's eager inquiries about all that had happened at Confluence since she had last been there and Wilma's quick, high-noted replies. Wilma, Lexie discovered, was friendly and plainly delighted to have company. She listened and laughed as Debbie related the Wendover news, her dark eyes alight with enjoyment. But Lexie noticed more than once that, in spite of her merry, bouncing manner, Wilma was very sure of herself. Lexie was certain that Wilma, like so many of the F.N.S. people, was quite capable of assuming authority.

In the time she had been at Wendover Lexie had learned to expect competency and the ability to undertake responsibility from the Service personnel. Sometimes she was certain that she was the only person connected with the group who did not show these qualities to a marked degree.

But Lexie was too tired to care about her own deficiencies or the contrasts in Wilma's personality now. Her thawing out by the fire, the heat of the room, and the substantial hot meal acted on her like a soporific; she was numb with weariness and longed for bed.

Wilma, who was evidently as quick in thought as she was in her motions, turned to her the moment the meal was over. "You go straight to bed," she said. "You and Debbie are bunking together in the guest room upstairs and everything's ready for you." Once again Lexie noticed the firm-

ness behind her high, almost shrill voice; it made any dispute impossible.

Lexie had no wish to refuse the suggestion in any case. She rose from the table and stumbled up the stairs, the long beam of her flashlight showing the way.

"Who wants to go on delivery call tonight?" Wilma's clear-noted question reached Lexie as she came to the top of the stairs.

"I'd sure love to," cried Debbie promptly. Then she gave a little cry of disappointment. "Oh, I just can't! It's Lexie's turn sure enough and she's just dyin' to go."

Lexie shut her eyes and groaned aloud. It would take an explosion, an earthquake, to waken her, she knew. Nothing on earth could force her out of bed to ride those trails at night. She found the bedroom with its cot beds and was vaguely conscious of brightly colored window curtains and the gay chintz covers on the bed. Then five minutes later she was beneath the blankets and sound asleep.

Sometime during the night an uproar of sound jerked Lexie awake. She sat bold upright in bed, wondering for a helpless moment where she was and what frightful disaster was causing this bedlam from without. She heard shouts, a frenzy of barking, and then a voice that suddenly made everything clear. It was Wilma's high voice calling from the next room that made Lexie remember where she was, and the words explained the noise.

"Is that you, Cale? Does Allie want me? Quiet, Peter! Yumpy, quiet now! I'll be right down, Cale." A window slammed and Lexie heard Wilma's quick, short steps in the next room.

The dogs continued to bark, however, and a man's deep voice tried to quiet them. Lexie knew that at any moment Wilma would open her door and call to her. She would expect her to leap at this chance to go on a delivery call. Lexie shut her eyes and tried desperately to pretend that she was asleep. She couldn't go. It was impossible. No one could expect her to go out after what she had been through that day. Then Lexie heard a knock on the door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

March 16—
Friday.

Dearest Mark:

Lexie leaned back and braced her feet more firmly against the rounds of her chair. She stared at the words she had written, then reached for another sheet of paper and began again. This time her pen raced over the paper and she gave no time to consider the effect of what she wrote.

Dear Mark:

Your letter was waiting for me when I got back from Lower Rounds and it's taken me all of a week to answer it. I'm sorry, but at Wendover you're either too busy or just plain too tired to write letters. It's after supper now, so I hope to have time to catch up with myself and my letters.

I guess I've kept you up to date on everything until I went off on rounds. Debbie and I went on practically a second's notice and rode twenty-five miles up and down absolutely perpendicular mountains through a

snowstorm to get to Confluence. I had to lead a relief horse most of the way, got lost in the storm, and all in all had a lively time. We got to Possum Bend at Confluence, which I think is easily the nicest nursing center of all—and I've seen three so I ought to know—about six o'clock. Wilma Mason, the head nurse there, is a lamb, rather quiet, but there's nothing she can't do. I didn't see so much of Timmy Grant, the other nurse, but she was nice, too. Anyway they gave us a gigantic supper and I fell into bed absolutely stunned. In the dead of night the dogs began to yowl and I woke up to hear a man bellowing something from the yard. You get used to all sorts of things in the Service, so I didn't think anything of the uproar. I heard Wilma call down to the man and it seems his wife was expecting her baby any minute and the husband had come for the nurse. It was my turn to go on delivery call, so I got dressed in nothing flat and went out to the stable with Wilma to help saddle up. It was two in the morning and black as pitch.

Lexie wrote this last quickly and tried not to remember the agonizing moments she had gone through when Wilma knocked on her door and told her that the expected call had come. She had known that she must go with Wilma, that Debbie had stepped aside so that she might have the privilege of accompanying the nurse. There was nothing in the world that Lexie wanted to do less. She was stiff from her long ride, her head ached with weariness, and the inky blackness of the night held a thousand unknown terrors.

Almost automatically she had pulled on her clothes and followed Wilma to the stable.

Lexie sighed at the memory and took up her pen once more.

The husband was waiting by the pullgate on a mule. I guess the dogs scared him, because he wouldn't come into the yard. Wilma took Orestes, her relief horse (her regular one is lame) and I rode Timmy's, a stubby black mare named Dolly who acted as though she hated me on sight. The man, whose name was Cale Buxton, said his wife was "punishin' bad" and he was in a perfect twit until we saddled up and were ready to go. Wilma had her delivery bags all set—the nurse-midwives keep them ready always—and she also had a couple of enormous flashlights to light the trail. All this time the two dogs were just about barking their lungs out and they didn't stop until Wilma shut them in the house with a few stern words. Cale led the way on his mule toward Wilder—luckily he lives this side of the river because there is a 'tide' as they say here and we'd have had to cross the ford by boat if he lived on the other side. We scrambled along in the dark mostly, only turning on the flashes occasionally. The horses know the way and are regular cats in the dark. I couldn't see a thing and it was quite an adventure riding in the dark and not knowing which way you were going.

Lexie remembered that dark ride and shivered. The night had seemed to close in on her like a smothering

cloud. Each step Dolly took she expected her to stumble and fall, pitching her off into the rocks and blackness below. Following close behind the ambling mule, with Wilma coming after her, Lexie had wondered more than once if she dared tell Wilma she could not go on, that she must turn back. But fear kept her silent, fear of Wilma's reaction and of the night. She would have to go back alone, and that in itself was an impossibility.

She began to write again:

The trail led up Wilder, the way Debbie and I had come that afternoon, only it crossed the creek about a mile up and then we just about crawled up a mountain on our hands and knees. The snow was still on the ground and it was absolutely freezing cold with ice in patches where there wasn't mud. But those horses made it, though Dolly went down on her knees once and my nose actually hit her head. All the time Cale was calling out to us to hurry and saying we'd "never git thar in time, 'cause Allie shore was punishin' bad." It made me nervous, but Wilma tried to reassure him. It seems this is Allie's fourth baby and Wilma has delivered all the others, so she knows just what to expect of Allie. Of course she'd been keeping her eye on Allie for months and wasn't worried that she'd miss her date with the new baby. We finally got to the top of the hill and there was the house perched on the edge looking just as though it was about to slide down into the creek. We could see it because of the light that came from the front door—which turned out to be

the only door—and the two windows which were covered with paper to keep out the cold.

Lexie put down her pen and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. It was no use trying to keep awake any longer; she would have to finish the letter another time. She glanced across the room toward Debbie's bed. All that was visible of her roommate was a bright topknot of light curls on the pillow. It was after twelve and time she, too, was in bed. Mark's letter could wait until tomorrow evening.

But it was Sunday afternoon before Lexie found time to go on with her letter. Except for the routine duties, the girls could do much as they pleased on Sundays, and Lexie took advantage of this free time to finish the long-delayed account of her experiences on Lower Rounds.

March 18—
Sunday

Dear Mark (again)

I simply couldn't finish this the other evening—I was just too sleepy to think so I had to stop. I'll try to bring you up to date now and will, if I can keep my mind off all the laughing and talking in Liz's room where everyone has collected for a gabfest. Anyway, to get back to the Buxton's house where I left you. As we rode into the yard we could see and hear that there seemed to be a lot of activity going on inside, all sorts of rushing around and children yelling. We tied our horses to the yard gate and Cale just turned his mule loose and rushed into the house ahead of us. When we

got inside we found Allie occupying the big double bed in the one room and the three children, all of them under six, dancing around the room in great excitement. None of them was fully dressed and one little tyke had on only a shirt. A neighbor woman was there, but she was so busy praying and hollering at the children to "keep peaceful" that she only added to the din. In spite of the fire it was cold as Greenland in the room. Big cracks in the floor and walls let in every breeze. There were only two chairs and a rickety sort of chest in the room, aside from the bed, and it seemed awfully forlorn. The neighbor woman hadn't done a thing to get ready for the baby, except put an axe under the bed to cut the pains. Poor Allie felt dreadful, but she didn't make a sound, just looked at us with enormous brown eyes like a trusting dog.

I wish you could have seen Wilma take charge of that situation. In just about two minutes she had the neighbor getting the children dressed, had hustled all of them off with her to her house to spend the night, and had set Cale to work getting coal to build up the fire. Then she scrubbed up in an icy pan of water, and got her things out of her saddlebags. All the time she talked soothingly to Allie, reassuring her and acting as though everything were all right. Wilma let me help lay out the things and fix up the bed. It was a sight. There was a rifle in bed with Allie as well as some kitchen spoons, a knife, and a wild miscellany of household gear. We got her all fixed with clean sheets

and then sat down to wait for Master Baby, who decided to put off his arrival in a cold world. I couldn't blame him. That room was the coldest place I've ever been in and even the fire didn't help. We huddled over it and listened to Cale breaking up coal in the shed outside.

After an hour, during which my feet and hands turned to pure ice, Wilma knew that we hadn't long to wait. She could tell because Allie began to moan "Oh, Lordy" and that's a stage that Wilma says is a sure sign the baby is about due. I was detailed to hold the flash because the oil lamp wasn't worth a thing. About ten minutes later the baby was there—only it was a Miss and not a Master. Such a tiny, red thing. I'd never seen a very new baby before, and Wilma detailed me to keep the mite warm in a blanket by the fire while she finished with Allie.

Cale came in and you could see he wished it was a boy, but all these mountain people love babies, especially the "least un," so there's no danger they won't love this one. Then Wilma let me help bathe the baby in warm oil and dress it in the clothes Allie had ready. We put on a tiny dress made of blue calico, and it seemed so funny to see a baby not in white. By this time Cale had a roaring fire, the room was warm, and Allie looked so comfortable and cozy and so happy holding that little new baby in her arms. I guess it's worth any time and trouble to the nurse-midwives to see such a peaceful sight when the baby comes at last.

Lexie recalled the scene in memory and once again felt the sensation of awed amazement that she had known when Wilma placed the tiny bundle in her arms. Lexie had sat by the fire, holding the baby gingerly, looking down at the small, puckered face within the circle of her arms. Once the baby sighed, a tired little sound that seemed so strange coming as it did from such a tiny morsel of humanity that Lexie laughed aloud. She saw Wilma glance at her and smile.

"She's a beauty, isn't she?" Wilma had said.

Lexie had nodded and hugged the baby closer. She knew then why a mother loved a baby so much; there was something so helpless, so completely dependent about this mite in her arms, it was impossible not to love it.

But this feeling was something she could not explain in a letter, so she went on in a more matter-of-fact strain.

Wilma was wonderful. I don't see how a nurse as young as she is can know so much and be so calm about everything. She made that tiny house seem a different place, and by the time we were ready to leave you'd never have known it for the cold, dreary place it was when we arrived. What with the warmth, the neatness of everything, and above all the new baby it was as cozy a spot as you'd want to see. Wilma promised to come back next day—the nurses make post-partum calls every day for about a week, then every few days.

I was dead when we got home, but glad I'd gone. I see now why the couriers like to go on delivery calls.

It's a wonderful feeling to help the nurse, and you feel very set up when it's all over and everybody's happy. Debbie and I stayed two nights at Confluence. I rode out with Wilma on her round of calls the next day and saw lots of different people and places. We stayed on this side of the river, for it's still up and you can't ford on horseback. Luckily no emergency calls came from the other side while we were there. I loved every bit of Confluence; it's so remote and peaceful. You feel cut off from everything, but you don't mind. Everything you want is right there. We played records at night or just talked and went to bed with the chickens practically. Incidentally they have their own chickens at Confluence and a Jersey cow that wanders around the yard as she pleases—and that's everywhere.

I thought I'd have time to tell you about going on to Bowlingtown and Brutus in more detail, but here comes my friend Morpheus again and I'm going to rush through that part of our trip. The ride to Bowlingtown from Confluence wasn't a bit bad. A pretty good road and only two hours riding. The center is a cute house and the nurse a dear who would give you the shirt off her back if she thought you needed it. We went out with her on a couple of calls, ate huge meals and talked, talked, talked. We only stayed one night there and went on to Brutus the next morning. A long ride, but nothing compared to our first day's jaunt. Practically as soon as we got to Brutus we got word they wanted us back in Wendover, so the next day we set out. Twenty-five miles over hill and dale, and I was

never so glad to see anything as I was the lights of Wendover that evening.

Since getting back I've been right here at Wendover, except for short trips here and there, either in the jeep or on dear old Cham. Everyone busy as fifty-nine bird dogs as usual. There's never a dull minute here, and just when you think there's going to be a lull a nurse comes in with a horse just filthy with mud and we have to get to work on it. We spend practically every waking minute grooming the horses or cleaning tack and I'm going to hire out as a groom when I get home.

Lexie paused and picked up Mark's letter. Once again she read a few words near the end of the sheet of paper, "I hope you've met Eleanor Payne. I know you'll like her and you two ought to get along well."

Lexie groaned aloud. She must say something to Mark about Eleanor, but something that would not betray her real feeling for her. She chewed the end of her pen for some minutes, then wrote in a hurried dash, "I've met Eleanor. She is a relief nurse here at Wendover now. She's wonderfully efficient and does a good job. Everyone seems to like her very much."

There, that would have to do as a reference to Eleanor. In the past week Lexie had seen very little of her, for both had been busy with their different duties. It was only at meals that they met, and Lexie was always careful to sit at the opposite end of the table. As she had written Mark, everyone seemed to like Eleanor. Sometimes Lexie felt

that Eleanor had been more readily accepted as part of the Wendover life than she had. It might be that her own knowledge of her first failures and mistakes made her feel this way; certainly there was very little in her colleagues' attitude that gave Lexie any real basis for this feeling. But she imagined that everyone remembered all her former errors as vividly as she did and for that reason must hold them against her. Eleanor, she was sure, had never been guilty of any such faults of judgment or practice in her work, and Lexie could not quite forgive so irreproachable a record. It was another score against her in Lexie's opinion. She knew that her feeling against Eleanor was a personal one and that Mark was chiefly responsible for it. If he admired Eleanor or loved her, as Lexie often feared, then she, Lexie Littleton, could not bring herself to like her. It was too much for human nature to expect that she could.

Lexie sighed as she folded her letter into the envelope. Eleanor Payne was the one flaw in her enjoyment of Wendover, aside from her nagging suspicion that the others must remember her past mistakes. This last week had been so different from her first few days. She was no longer afraid of the horses and could groom them almost as efficiently as Debbie or Liz did. She knew the trails around Wendover and they no longer held any fears for her. As long as her life was centered at Wendover she knew that she was capable of fitting into its routine duties. If only Eleanor were not there, Lexie was sure that she would be perfectly happy.

The sound of footsteps in the hall jolted Lexie from her

thoughts and a moment later Debbie appeared in the doorway.

"Whatever in this world are you doin'?" Tea's over and done with and you clean missed it." Debbie looked almost accusingly at Lexie. To miss a meal was very nearly sinful in Debbie's opinion.

"I'm sorry, but it wasn't my turn to get it and I had this letter to finish." Lexie sealed her letter and stuffed it into the pocket of her jeans.

"Well, starve yourself to death if you want. Would you like to go to chapel? We have it after tea every Sunday and Mrs. Breckinridge is goin' there now."

Lexie glanced down at her faded jeans and the shapeless sweater she wore. It did not seem a suitable costume for chapel. "I ought to change," she murmured.

"Put on this beret and my jacket, hear? Nobody gives a hoot in a forest full of owls what anybody's wearin'." Debbie tossed the jacket at Lexie and waited with ill-concealed impatience as Lexie brushed her hair. "You sure can fuss," she commented, as they went down the stairs.

Lexie smiled. For all Debbie's talk, she looked as neat and trim as anyone could who wore a pair of khaki trousers, a shirt several sizes too large for her, and a pair of muddy rubber boots. But no matter what Debbie had on it suited her and in some incomprehensible way only served to increase her resemblance to a wide-eyed china doll.

When the two girls reached the small log cabin beyond the stables, they found that the little room which had been

fitted out as a chapel was already well filled. Several rows of chairs faced a simple altar on which candles were burning. Other candles in brackets about the room shed a soft glow in the dusky evening light. At the back of the room Lexie saw a tiny organ, so small that it did not seem possible that it was capable of producing music. But one of the staff workers began to play the familiar music of an old hymn and Lexie joined in the singing with the others. For a moment she felt strange and out of place singing these words in this remote little room, so unlike the huge Boston church where she had heard them before. It was not like any church or chapel she had ever known. The room was small and unadorned, its log walls barren of decoration; there were no colored windows, no rector in surplice and stole, and none of the hushed magnificence that Lexie had always associated with church-going.

But before the last words of the hymn were sung Lexie knew that this chapel at Wendover held all the peace and beauty that she had unconsciously missed in other churches. The very quietness of the surrounding hills seemed to enter, to become part of the place, and to lend their spirit to those within. When Mrs. Breckinridge rose from her place at the front of the room and read the evening service and led the prayers, Lexie listened with more understanding of the beautiful words than she had ever known before. They seemed to mean something to her, to have a special significance and power. It was the spirit that counted, she realized. The surroundings, the "outward trappings" did not matter. What was it that Jesus had said? "When two or three are gathered together in my name—"

That was it. They had all come together here because they wanted to; there was no compulsion, no wish to do as others did. Lexie listened with her head bowed and a warmth within her that lightened her heart.

When the short service was over, Lexie rose from her place and followed Debbie from the Chapel. She saw Eleanor Payne sitting at the back of the room and, in the glow of her present feeling, smiled at her as though they were the best of friends. Eleanor nodded in return, but Lexie noticed that she seemed preoccupied and that she looked faintly worried. It was so astonishing to see the self-possessed Eleanor even slightly upset that Lexie paused. The spirit of the evening service still warmed her and it seemed wrong to harbor resentment or jealousy toward anyone. Perhaps she ought to show more friendliness toward Eleanor. Lexie knew that their coolness toward each other was her own fault. Just at this moment it did not seem right.

Lexie took a tentative step in Eleanor's direction. There was time for a walk before supper. In line with her new resolve Lexie impulsively decided to ask Eleanor to take a walk along the river road with her. She saw Eleanor glance up at her as she came near, and then Lexie saw something else. There was a small heap of letters on Eleanor's lap and the letter on top of the pile was addressed to Eleanor in handwriting that was familiar to Lexie. It was Mark's writing.

Lexie stopped as though struck by a sudden paralysis. Her good resolution died as quickly as it had been born. So Mark was in correspondence with Eleanor; he was

writing to her, and what he had written must be the cause of Eleanor's preoccupation. Lexie's throat tightened and for a moment her feet refused to move. She knew she was staring at Eleanor, that her expression must show what she was feeling.

"Lexie!" It was Eleanor's voice and she sounded annoyed. Then Lexie saw her snatch up her bundle of letters, as though trying to hide them. Eleanor looked straight at Lexie and there was something in that look that was both a challenge and an act of defiance.

Lexie made a muffled sound that was half an exclamation, half a protest. She turned quickly and ran from the room. Without looking behind her she knew that Eleanor was staring after her. She realized that she was acting rudely, that others, too, must have noted her abrupt departure. It didn't matter, nothing mattered but the fact that Mark was writing to Eleanor and that Eleanor had tried to conceal his letter. In a way it seemed to Lexie that this act was an open declaration of the conflict between them.

On the steps of the Garden House she glanced behind her and saw Debbie and Eleanor walking together down the path that led to the lower road. So Debbie was going to take the walk she had planned. For a moment Lexie felt utterly deserted. She wondered if others had noticed that she had tried to avoid Eleanor. Well, she told herself as she went on to her room, no one else had to face the probability that Eleanor was someone who was admired and perhaps loved by the one man in the world she wanted for herself. In a sense this last encounter had clarified their

relationship; now Eleanor must understand why there could be no friendliness between them.

Lexie was very quiet at supper. Even Liz's announcement that the sore on Miss Pat's back was entirely cured did nothing to lift her spirits. She was determined to take the darkest view of this latest development in what she secretly called "Mark and Eleanor's affair" and almost enjoyed the feeling of martyrdom that sometimes replaced her very human jealousy. If Mark preferred Eleanor, then she would step aside and let no one see what she was suffering.

But in the next four days a healthier reaction prevailed. She was far too busy to brood about her troubles and she resolved not to let Eleanor spoil Wendover for her. The best thing to do was to go on as she had before—avoiding Eleanor as much as possible and trying not to worry too much about Mark. With her routine duties of caring for the horses and going on the multifold errands that the days' work demanded, every waking moment was fully occupied.

On two occasions Liz and Debbie were sent on missions that left the entire grooming of the horses to Lexie, and she was proud that they intrusted the task to her. Working on her own with the responsibility of seeing that each horse was in perfect condition forced her to realize how much depended on her judgment and knowledge. Such a thing as taking out a horse with a saddle sore as she had once done seemed incredible to her now. She labored over each horse with an almost fanatical care and enjoyed every moment she spent around the stables and tackroom.

Liz called to her as she was leaving the dining room one afternoon with a request to help her load a new supply of feed on the jeep. Lexie had planned to clean out the tack-room that afternoon and to saddle soap the two saddles that the nurses had used that morning. But Liz's appeal was not to be denied and she followed the older courier down to the shed beyond the stables where the jeep and truck were housed.

"When did the new feed come?" she asked. "I thought it was held up over in Hazard somewhere."

"It was until I went for it this morning. One of the men went with me in the truck to help load it, now we've got to shift some of it to the jeep and get it over to Beech Fork. They're low on feed." Liz spoke with her usual rush of words as though impatient of explanations.

The feed bags were still heaped in the back of the truck and it was only by dint of considerable effort that the two girls were able to shift half a dozen of the awkward bags into the body of the jeep. Three weeks before Lexie would never had thought it possible that she could grab one end of a bulky bag of cracked oats or bran and lift it about as she was now doing. But her muscles had hardened in these weeks and she no longer took time even to wonder at herself for what she was now capable of doing.

"Eleanor said something about riding up to the head of Hurricane this afternoon," said Liz when they had finished. "Maybe she'll want company. It's a long ride. Otherwise I'd ask you to come along with me." Liz was already in the driver's seat, ready to leave and obviously very much in a hurry.

Lexie thought quickly. "Maybe neither of the nurses will be at Beech Fork when you get there. You'll need someone to help with those feed bags. Hadn't I better come with you?"

Lexie could not be sure whether she saw Liz look at her rather strangely for a moment. It almost seemed as though she wanted to ask her something. Then Liz smiled with her usual easy good nature and motioned Lexie to the seat beside her. The look was gone from her eyes now and Lexie was sure it had been her imagination.

"Hop in. We'll have to hurry if we want to get back for tea. It's my turn to fix it." Liz started the motor and a few minutes later they were on the road that followed along beside Muncie Creek toward the Beech Fork Nursing Center.

It was a soft spring day, one of the first that gave a real promise of warm weather and the green growth of summer. Many of the trees along the way had begun to assume a fuzzy look on twigs and branches, and spring flowers were everywhere. Lexie had learned the names of many of the wild flowers that grew near Wendover, and she recognized the wild sweet william, wild geranium, and azalea that splashed the brown hillsides with color.

"The redbud covers the hills around here like snow. The burning bush is wonderful, too. Masses of them everywhere. After that comes the dogwood, which will be along soon," said Liz, who seldom could remain silent for long.

Lexie drew a deep breath and remembered her first impressions of the mountains. They had seemed bare and hideous to her then, now she wondered how she could have

been so blind to their rough beauty. Each folding hill, every gray rock, seemed alive and full of color to her; she knew them now in all their moods of rain and sun and darkness. The coming spring merely added a new light and gaiety to what was already beautiful in her eyes.

Halfway on their journey they passed Stinnett and the little white building that housed the clinic. A local store was across the road and Liz stopped the jeep. "I'm going to take some ice cream to the nurses," she said. "They never get enough of it."

The store was a one-story, single-room building and contained everything from parts for a plow to shoe laces. The counters and shelves were piled helter-skelter with heaps of clothing, canned goods, and tools, all of them lying side by side in what seemed to Lexie utter confusion. A modern freezing unit contained the ice cream and soft drinks and Lexie looked from this up-to-date icebox to the goods on the near-by shelves with ill-concealed astonishment.

"Do they sell all this stuff?" she whispered to Liz. "Just look at those hats over there! They're positively Victorian." She nodded toward a heap of straw headgear that lay on a counter near them.

"They keep off the sun and that's what's necessary," said Liz cheerfully. She entered into a lively conversation with the proprietor and Lexie realized that he must be a man of considerable standing in the community. He seemed to know all the news of the surrounding territory and to be able to tell Liz something about every family in the district.

"Lije is one of our favorite people," said Liz, when she

and Lexie were in the jeep once more. "He is father confessor to everybody around here and no one knows how much he helps people that need it. He takes messages for us and helps the nurses in all sorts of ways." She paused to glance at her watch. "Good night, we'll have to hurry! It's almost three."

They reached the ford below the Beech Fork center half an hour later and churned through the water at a snail's pace. Lexie had never accustomed herself to crossing the river in a jeep, and she drew a long breath of relief when they were safely over.

"You'll have to get some practice driving the jeep," said Liz as they came out on the road once more. "Ever driven one?"

Lexie did not reply directly. "I've driven a car for years," she said. "I'm sure I could drive a jeep. It looks easy."

But Liz was too busy negotiating a turn in the road to reply. They went through the pullgate a moment later and up a steep driveway into the yard of the nursing center. The white house was perched on a steep bank above the river and beyond were the stables. Both house and yard seemed deserted, but the sharp barking of dogs could be heard from the house.

"Those cocker spaniels," said Liz with a chuckle. "I'll go let them know we're not robbers and see if one of the nurses is in. How about backing the jeep up to the stable door while I'm gone. We haven't got much time."

Liz, who had evidently taken Lexie's reply about her driving abilities at its face value, jumped from the jeep

and went toward the house. As Lexie slid into the driver's seat, she realized that Liz had no doubts as to her capabilities as a driver and Lexie decided that she would allow herself none. She had driven a car for years as she had told Liz; a jeep could hold no terrors for her. The gears seemed a little stiff, but she managed to shift them and leaned out the side to look back toward the stables to guide her way. She let out the clutch with a jerk and the next moment felt the jeep leap forward.

Until that instant she had not noticed that Liz had parked near the edge of the yard and that just ahead was the steep bank that led down to the road and the river beyond. The jeep was not going backward toward the stables as she intended, but straight ahead and at an alarming speed toward the bank. She must have shifted into second instead of reverse. Lexie's hands froze on the wheel and for a long moment, as the trees on the bank swept toward her, she could not think what she must do to prevent the impending disaster. Then, just as the jeep reached the crest of the bank, she reached down and clawed at the hand brake. The front wheels skidded, and slowly, with seeming reluctance, dipped down over the edge of the bank and the jeep slid forward after them. Lexie shut her eyes and pulled desperately at the brake.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ALTHOUGH the jeep slowed under the pressure of the brake, it dipped forward down the bank at a sickening angle. It slid another few inches, then, amid the crackling of the underbrush beneath its wheels, it came to a halt. Lexie opened her eyes and found herself staring straight at the trunk of a huge tree whose branches hung down over the jeep like a protecting curtain. Without looking down she could feel that the jeep was balanced on the edge of the bank and that if she moved at all it might crash headlong into the tree ahead.

"Lexie! What in the—? Good night, don't move!" Liz's voice was a shriek of warning. But her admonition was unnecessary. Lexie was too frightened to move and quite prepared to believe that the next moment both she and the jeep would end their earthly existence in a hideous encounter with the looming tree trunk.

She heard Liz's footsteps as they ran toward her and, out of the corner of one eye, saw her slip down the bank to get a better look.

"Can you shift into reverse?" asked Liz. She had reached

the front of the jeep now and was leaning down to look under the wheels.

Lexie risked a shake of her head. "I don't dare move," she whispered. "I'm just balancing here. I can feel the jeep wavering."

"Hm, let's see. I wish one of the nurses was here with the other jeep. We could haul you out in no time."

In spite of her fright Lexie noticed that there was no censure in Liz's voice, no overtone of blame for the near disaster. She sounded quite casual, as though accidents such as this were nothing out of the ordinary. Lexie saw Liz straighten up and look at her with a grin.

"Nice spot you're in," she said.

"Liz." Lexie spoke hurriedly and loudly, forgetting that over-emphasis was dangerous. "Liz, it was my fault. I never drove a jeep before and I thought it was just as easy as a car. I must have shifted into second. I'm sorry."

Liz laughed. "I should have stood by to see how you made out. Now you wait right there. I'm going to look for a couple of logs or rocks to put under the front wheels. I think you can back out then."

Suddenly it seemed to Lexie as though a great weight were lifted from her spirit. She had confessed, admitted that the accident was her fault, and as a result Liz had merely laughed. There had been something in her voice as she explained what she planned to do that told Lexie that in some odd way Liz liked her better than she had before. If it took an accident such as this to win Liz's regard, Lexie almost wished it had happened sooner. But she knew that

it was her open confession that had made the difference to Liz. She had not tried to shift the blame on anyone else or to make an excuse for herself. She had admitted a careless mistake and as a result she had won the approval of someone she admired. In Lexie's opinion it was something worth thinking about.

Liz returned from a foraging expedition to the stables with an armful of lumber. It took her some time to build a suitable platform under the wheels, but with the aid of stones and a log of wood she finally announced that she thought it sturdy enough.

"Now shift carefully," she advised, "and, for Pete's sake, make sure it's in reverse. Take it slowly and you'll get more power."

Lexie swung the gear over with infinite caution and slowly, with breathless tension, let out the clutch. The motor hummed, then roared as she stepped up the gas. She felt the wheels grip and the rending sound of splintering wood as the rear wheels churned at the underbrush. The jeep shuddered and hung motionless for a moment. Then with a jerk it leaped backward.

"Step it up!" shouted Liz, who was pushing with all her strength against the front fender. "Give it the gas!"

Lexie jammed her foot to the floorboard and the next moment the jeep shot up over the bank and into the safety of the stableyard. She had the presence of mind to yank at the brake before she should crash against the stable door. The second the car stopped Lexie jumped down to the ground as though escaping from a burning building.

"Whew!" It was all she could think of to say, but it expressed her relief more adequately than a dozen words.

Liz looked at her and smiled. "Next time you want to do trapeze work, give me warning, will you? You ought to get up a vaudeville act as a balancing artist." She spoke teasingly, but there was the same friendly note in her voice that Lexie had noticed before.

Lexie smiled wanly. "My knees feel like rubber. I'll never drive a jeep again."

"Oh, yes, you will. You'll drive it home. Come on, we've got to rush. Let's get these feed bags unloaded. No one's at home here, so there's no reason to stay. I put the ice cream in the icebox."

Lexie discovered during the drive back to Wendover that she had no reason to look upon the jeep as anything other than an extremely dependable and powerful car. Even crossing the river was not as hazardous as she had feared, and driving on the highway proved quite uneventful.

"See! There's nothing to it," said Liz, as they climbed the hill to Wendover. "Park it under the shed. I've got to dash if I'm going to get the tea." Liz was already running toward the main building, shouting her directions back over her shoulder.

By the time Lexie reached the living room in the Big House, she discovered that everyone was in full possession of the story of her exploit. She was greeted with a chorus of questions and exclamations and a great deal of good-natured teasing. Some of the girls pretended to believe that Lexie had done it on purpose to show her skill as a "driver

who knew when to stop," and others suggested a variety of nicknames that might be applied to one who could balance a jeep with such nicety.

For a moment Lexie did not know how to take the questions and teasing. Her companions had never treated her like this before. It was generally Debbie whom they teased, for Debbie was always getting into difficulties and making an amusing story of her adventures. Lexie had rather envied Debbie the attention she received; it was obvious that everyone liked her. When Debbie told of her mistakes, her friends laughed with her and made a joke of her misadventures. Now they were doing the same thing to Lexie. She was the butt of their good-natured remarks and she knew why. It was because she had admitted her mistake, had said that the accident was her fault. If she had tried to make an excuse, as she had so often done before, no one would have mentioned the incident and no one would have spoken to her as they were doing now. There would have been none of the friendliness that she now knew was directed toward her. As Lexie had previously realized, there was much food for thought in this discovery she had made.

In the next few days Lexie was far too busy to have much time for introspection. She only realized that she was far happier in her work and more at ease with her companions than she had been, and she attributed much of this feeling to that moment when she had confessed her fault to Liz in the stableyard at Beech Fork. Some of this new contentment she tried to put into words in her diary, but it was hard to describe a sensation that was so nebulous. In the

main she confined herself to facts in this record of her experiences.

March 22—

Beech Fork Nursing Center

Am writing sitting up in bed—cold as blazes again just when we thought spring had really come. Liz and I rode over to Beech Fork this afternoon on a second's notice—the start of Upper Rounds. Just had time to pack pyjamas and toothbrush in my saddle bags. Rode Cham, thank heaven, as we are old friends and I trust him on any trail. Not a bad ride, but it would have been easier if we hadn't had to carry a setting hen in a wooden box. Miss Freeman thought of it at the last minute and remembered the nurse here wanted to raise some chicks. Hideous beast, kept pecking through the wire screen. Rode up the river through pine woods, back and forth across the river, really lovely country and more like New England than most spots around here, what with the pines. The center fairly swarms with cocker spaniels belonging to the two nurses and they split their sides barking as we rode into the yard. The setting hen drove them crazy until we got it locked away in the loft. Had a fat supper and listened to the nurses and Liz "reminisce" about the old days of the Service life. Nowadays, with the new roads, the Beech Fork nurses can cover lots of their territory in their jeep, but it used to be all horseback country. One nurse is a Britisher who's been here for years; she remembers it when it was really

primitive. Felt sleepy as I always do, so came to bed and now writing when I ought to be sleeping. Think I'll give up writing letters and just send sheets of this diary to Mother and Mark—too tired to write letters and no time anyway. Letter from Mark just before I left Wendover. He didn't mention Eleanor. I wish I knew—oh I don't know what. Now I can't send this part of my diary to anyone. We go to Flat Creek Center tomorrow sometime. Too sleepy to write any more.

March 24—

Red Bird Nursing Center

Skipped last night—don't know how long I can keep up this diary, but I promised Mark I'd write in it. He says it's a good idea to get the habit of putting down one's thoughts, but I don't believe he ever rode for hours, groomed four horses, sat up with a sick horse, and then tried to express any "thoughts." I just don't have any after a day like yesterday.

Liz and I left Beech Fork after lunch and hit out along Bad Creek Trail for Flat Creek Center. Pretty rough country and uphill most of the way—not many cabins, and when we passed one the people came out to watch us go by as though we were strangers from Mars. Never can get over the lovely children, all so fat and fair, like those Raphael angels in the Fine Arts. Crossed from Bad Creek over a ridge to Bowens Creek to Red Bird River. In and out of the creeks most of the time, and they are still high. Warmer, thank good-

ness, so my feet were merely half frozen instead of solid ice. A good road along the river and the country much flatter, hills farther away and you miss them. Almost as though you were unprotected without them.

Flat Creek Center is built like most of the others: big living and dining room combined, three bedrooms, one a double, and the clinic and waiting room. It was clinic day when we got there and the last of the people were just leaving. All the centers have clinic once a week and the people come for medicine, preventive shots of various kinds, general check-ups, and to have the children looked at. If anyone needs hospitalization or the doctor's attention, the nurse sees to it that arrangements are made with the hospital at Hyden or the doctor. I saw one mother with seven small children leaving as we rode into the yard. She was "totin' " one and looked so tired, but the children were spandy clean and beautiful as always. They had books with them, for the nurse keeps a circulating library and it's open on clinic day.

Both the nurses here are friendly and hospitable, just as they are everywhere in the Service—always so glad to see you and take you right in without any fuss but so much warmth. Liz and I groomed our horses and the one the other nurse had used that afternoon. Seems she'd been out twice during the previous night for delivery calls and had had one that morning. She went right to bed and we never heard a sound from her the rest of the time we were there. After supper the handy man who helps in the stable came running

in to tell the nurse that her horse was "actin' mighty quare." He even said in a sort of gloomy way that it was "layin' down to its misery." All of us made a dash for the stable and there was the poor horse lying down in the stall, fairly moaning in agony. Of course Liz knew right away what was the matter; its sides were all swollen and it kept trying to roll over. Colic. All the centers have a stock of horse medicine and Liz got out the colic remedy which we had to give the horse with a syringe. Getting a couple of ounces of medicine down a sick horse's mouth is no joke, but with me to help hold the horse's head Liz managed. Then Liz told the nurse she'd sit up with the horse and for both of us to go to bed. But I thought I'd better keep her company as the horse didn't act any better. We had to repeat the dose in about an hour and give it a quart of linseed oil, too. We took turns sleeping—or napping—on a pile of hay in one corner, and what with the horse moaning and the general worry it wasn't a restful night. Once when I was on watch the horse started to get up and nearly stepped on Liz, but I pushed it out of the way and the poor thing lay down again. I thought I'd done something awful and was horribly worried, but half an hour later the horse hopped up as bright as a dollar and evidently all cured. But it was daylight by then, and Liz and I fairly crawled into the house to catch a couple of hours' sleep.

We came on here to Red Bird Nursing Center in the afternoon—a short easy ride along what passes

around here for a road the whole way. Followed right down along the Red Bird River from one valley to the next. Of course the road was solid mud, as it rained all the way—started to pour right after lunch, but Liz decided we ought to go on as they were expecting us at Red Bird. I wore a rain cape that leaked like a sieve and was sodden when I got here. Still raining now, can hear it on the roof overhead and it's a sort of cozy sound now we're inside. This is a log house, though built on the same general plan as the other centers—very comfortable. We hope to start back to Wendover tomorrow—a twenty-five-mile ride, but a good road the whole way—so they say. Wonder if I'll have a letter from Mark. Wonder if Eleanor's heard from him again. I wouldn't ask her for the world.

March 27—

Wendover

Don't know why I try to keep this thing up—always behind and so little time. Seems ages ago that Liz and I came back from Red Bird. We did come back the next day, as the rain had stopped and it was a beautiful day, warm as summer. That's just like the weather around here—a snow storm one day, then deep summer the next. We had a long ride, but nothing happened, except I broke a rein and Cham got excited and nearly threw me. We were right near a bridge when it happened, and Cham almost pranced off into an absolutely raging torrent, but Liz grabbed the other rein in time and yanked him back. We spliced

the rein so it was all right, but my heart didn't stop jumping until we reached Wendover. Took us nearly five hours to make the trip. Wendover looked welcoming as always, so many new flowers in the garden below the Big House and some of the trees are practically in leaf.

Lots of rushing around here, as Abby has dozens of flu cases and two babies due any minute. Eleanor is handling most of the flu, but more cases every day. They are scared of a real epidemic, as this is the time of year for it. Next day I went with Abby to help with a couple of health calls and she let me take temps and pulses. Learned a lot about what to do and what to advise the mothers to do for the sick children. Also saw two children with worms—poor things—their tummies ache and they can't hold a thing. Abby doles out worm pills and explains the procedure. The mothers hate to give the treatment, as the children can't eat any supper except fluids, then they get the medicine and the next morning a good doze of epsom salts. Then it's good-bye worms, but I guess it's no fun to get rid of them. All the people here love children so much they can't bear to make them take anything disagreeable, but the nurses try to insist on a worm treatment twice a year. Spent all the next two days after getting back from rounds going with Abby on her calls. It was fun, and I love actually helping with the sick people. My Nurses' Aide is wonderfully useful and I never realized I'd learned so much.

March 28—

Confluence

Wonder of wonders. Who would ever think I'd see this heavenly place again so soon. Last night Mrs. Breckinridge sent for me and told me she'd like me to come here for a few days at least to help Wilma and Timmy. They have a real flu epidemic here and need someone to help with the general health calls. I just jumped at the chance because it's been such fun to work with Abby in the last few days and I love Confluence. Set out this morning on Cham—in luck again to be able to take him, as he's my pet—and felt like a regular Columbus to be going alone. Thank heaven I didn't have to go the way I did before. The river's down enough to ford at Dry Hill, so I got all sorts of directions from Liz and got started about nine o'clock, taking clean shirts and stuff in saddlebags. My duffle bag hasn't come yet and I'm still living out of grab. I'd like a few brisk words with the express company, I can tell you. Dry Hill is about twelve miles straight down the river from Hyden, a winding dirt road the whole way. Got pretty tiresome after a while, as nothing happened and I really missed the creeks and trails. Nothing but a store at Dry Hill. I crossed the Middle Fork there and followed a trail right along the river. Forded again at the mouth of Hell-for-Certain and on down to Confluence. Took me seven hours, and I was never so glad to see any spot on earth as the center. No one home when I arrived, but I fixed myself a fat sandwich in the kitchen, after I'd groomed Cham and fed him his ration of feed and hay. Wilma and Timmy

were back for supper and tired out. Dozens of flu cases, and they seemed glad to see me. Stars out tonight—am writing in my room upstairs and I can hear the river humming along outside. So very quiet—I'm humming inside, too. Must write Mark, but too sleepy. Hope he understands. Wonder if he knows how much I think of him or if he thinks of me. I wish I knew.

In the days that followed Lexie was to discover that she had very little time for her diary. Her life at Confluence became a bewildering round of activity that occupied her every waking moment. At night she was too tired to do anything but tumble into bed and fall immediately into a dreamless sleep. Even Mark, who was seldom far from her thoughts, began to seem almost unreal, someone she had known in another lifetime.

The first day she spent at the center, she found that Wilma expected her to take her full share of the responsibilities of the district. At lunch on that day Wilma turned to her and said, "Lexie, you remember where the Kilbournes live, don't you? It's the house up Wilder just before you get to the Buxtons. We went past it when you were here before."

Lexie wrinkled her forehead and tried to picture Wilder Creek and its winding trail. She had followed that trail several times, but the houses along the way had never assumed a real identity. "I remember the bank below the Buxtons," she said doubtfully. "Do the Kilbournes live in that house just where you turn up the bank?"

"Good girl!" Wilma's black eyes lighted approvingly. "That's the place. I want you to ride over there this afternoon and see little Evie Kilbourne. I had a message this morning she's sick. There are three in the family already with flu, so that's probably the trouble."

Lexie sat up straighter and tried not to show that she was impressed by the fact that Wilma would intrust such a mission to her. She had made several calls with Wilma that morning, but this was her first real responsibility. Lexie hoped that she looked suitably professional and tightened her lips in order to further the impression of dignified competence. But Wilma's next words proved that Lexie was not yet to be accredited full professional status.

"Just take her temp and pulse and report back to me. Tell Mrs. Kilbourne I'll stop in tomorrow morning. There's not a hope of isolating any of them, but make Mrs. Kilbourne see that Evie's got to stay in bed if she has a temperature." Wilma's high, volatile voice held the same note of firm authority that Lexie had noticed before.

Lexie had pictured herself prescribing treatment and giving medicines and it was a letdown to know that her duties were to be so slight. But she nodded to show that she understood what she must do.

"Then you can ride up the creek to the second bend and ask about Effie Cullman's new baby. Don't go in, though, Lexie. It wouldn't be safe after being at the Kilbourne's. Just tell Effie that I'll stop in to see them tomorrow morning. That will take care of the afternoon for you. I'll see you at dinner." Wilma left the dining room, moving so

quickly with her short bouncing steps that Lexie was almost surprised to find herself alone a moment later.

Equipped with saddlebags containing the necessary medical supplies, Lexie was soon on her way. The late March days were already softening into the milder warmth of April and it seemed probable that the month would "go out like a lamb" in accordance with the ancient augury. Cham seemed to feel the lilt of the day as much as Lexie did; he danced along the river path as though longing to let himself out in a good gallop.

"Easy, boy," advised Lexie, pulling him down to a walk. "We've got work to do today. Look, there's a purple trillium, and don't you eat it either. Did you ever see such dogwood? It's just drifting over the hills."

Lexie looked across the river at the rising mountain beyond. Patches of flowering dogwood had begun to show on all the surrounding hills. In Lexie's imagination it was like a scattering of snow that brightened the brown earth and lent a dancing light to the landscape. All during the ride up the river and creek, her mood reflected the new and softening beauty of the mountains. She could not remember now that she had ever thought these hills bare and ugly.

But the Kilbourne's little gray house and the misery within its crowded rooms soon brought her back to a realization that there could be suffering even on a day such as this. The small two room cabin was stifling hot and Lexie's first impression was that the entire family had retired to bed in the largest room. Both beds were occupied and

heaped with patchwork quilts in spite of the warmth of the day.

"Air you the new nurse?" A woman's voice asked the question and Lexie turned to see a thin, dark-haired woman standing in the door that led to the kitchen shed. She looked utterly wornout and so discouraged that she seemed quite indifferent to the illness of her family.

"I've come to help the nurses," replied Lexie hastily. "Are—are all the children sick?" She realized now that all the heads on the pillows belonged to children; there must be six of them at least, she estimated. Their blue eyes stared at her and their flushed cheeks glowed feverishly bright against the pillows.

Mrs. Kilbourne nodded. "All five has the misery. Seems like hit's a judgment." She sighed wearily and rolled her hands in her apron.

"They ought not to be in bed together," announced Lexie. "You should keep them away from each other and they don't need so many covers. They'll roast to death." She advanced on the bed and stripped off several layers of quilt. The children cowered away from her and one began to whimper.

"Hain't no other beds." Mrs. Kilbourne sounded agrieved. "Don't take them quilts. You got to sweat the fever out." With an angry twitch, she restored the covers and stood back to look at Lexie. There was defiance in that look and Lexie knew that she had not dealt at all tactfully or well with the situation. Something in Mrs. Kilbourne's face told her that it was not the time to make amends now. The best course was to get little Evie's temperature and

leave the rest to Wilma. The child's pulse was rapid and her fever high, but there was nothing Lexie could do but note the fact and hope that Wilma could arrange a more desirable distribution of the sick children. Now that she had lost Mrs. Kilbourne's confidence, she could think of several ways in which they could be made more comfortable.

"Miss Mason will come tomorrow," said Lexie as she left. "She will have medicine for you."

The look of relief in Mrs. Kilbourne's eyes was not flattering, but Lexie knew that she deserved it. Next time she must remember not to be so hasty—to make suggestions with more tact and understanding. Abby or Wilma would have treated the situation with far more skill, she knew.

Lexie was so occupied with her own thoughts that she scarcely saw which way Cham was going. It was not until he paused to snatch a tuft of grass that Lexie awoke from her self-accusations. She found that Cham had stopped directly in front of the shabby little cabin where the Corey family lived. Lexie recognized the slanting porch, the broken steps, and the sagging front door. In the new growth and promise of the spring day, the little house looked even more desolate than she remembered it. She saw a movement within the door and, acting on impulse, called out,

"Mrs. Corey, is that you?"

There was a minute's quiet, then Mrs. Corey stood in the doorway, the little boy at her side. She looked hurriedly behind her, then nodded a greeting. Lexie saw with a shock that Mrs. Corey seemed to have aged in the short

time since she had seen her; her hair straggled over her neck and her eyes and cheeks were sunken. She was still waiting for her baby, but it was obvious that her time could not be far away.

"Mrs. Corey, have you seen the nurse?" Lexie could not resist the question, tactful or not. It was so plain that the woman needed help that she longed to do something for her.

Mrs. Corey started slightly, then shook her head. Suddenly she stepped forward and walked quickly down to the gate by which Lexie had stopped. She was breathless when she reached it, but she looked up at Lexie as though eager to speak to her. "*He* won't stand for hit. *He* allows as how we mustn't be beholden to nobody. But hit don't seem as though I could stand hit again alone. I lost four. Hit scares me, but *he* won't hear on hit." Mrs. Corey's words came in a rush as though she longed to confide her fears. There was no doubt as to the identity of *he*; Mrs. Corey's emphasis on the pronoun was identification in itself.

"You aren't 'beholden' to the nurse," exclaimed Lexie. "You can pay for her services. She's here to help you. You *must* register with her, so she can be here when the baby comes."

Mrs. Corey shook her head. "*He* won't hear on hit. He's a good man; he's good to us, but hit's his religion to stand by hisself. I—I—" She hesitated, then said simply, "I'm scared to lose another."

Lexie did not know what to say. She knew that words were useless, that Mrs. Corey's fear of her husband was an

effective stumbling block to any persuasions she might use. If only Wilma were here to help her; Lexie was sure she would know what to say now. She glanced at the little boy who was playing in a puddle in the yard and noted that he was barefooted.

"You know, the nursing center sells clothes and shoes very cheaply," she said suddenly. "You might find something for your little boy. The nurse has sales every so often." Perhaps through the child she might persuade Mrs. Corey to take some action in her own behalf. The secondhand clothing that the center sold at intervals might be a drawing card that would bring Mrs. Corey to the center.

But Mrs. Corey shook her head once more. "*He* wouldn't hear on hit," she repeated dully. She stiffened suddenly and looked behind her. Then, before Lexie could say anything further, she turned and fairly ran for the house with the little boy at her heels.

Lexie knew without being told that Mr. Corey must be in the vicinity. If he discovered that his wife had been talking with one of the Service people, it might cause trouble between them. Lexie dug her heels in Cham's sides and disappeared around a bend in the path as quickly as possible. Once safely out of sight, she gave Cham's reins an angry shake. How could any man treat his wife so callously? He must know she was frightened. If he was "good" to his wife, as she claimed, he ought to want to help her. Lexie longed for some persuasive power that would convince Mr. Corey of his error. Then she thought of the dark, fierce-looking man and shivered. She knew she would

never dare to speak to him, much less try to urge him to take action against his will. It seemed an insoluble problem. But Mrs. Corey remained in her thoughts all during her ride up the creek to the Cullman's house.

A row of children, ranging in age from two to twelve years, lined the picket fence before the Cullman's neat little house. They were obviously waiting for her and bursting with impatience to impart a piece of vital information. As she came into sight a chorus of shouts greeted her. In spite of the bedlam of sound, Lexie made out that they were trying to tell her something. She caught the words "bad off" and "misery" and understood that someone needed help.

"Now everybody be quiet," cried Lexie, smiling at the row of excited faces. "You," she indicated a girl of about twelve, "tell me what's happened."

The child drew a long breath and, after a triumphant look at her brothers and sisters, said importantly, "Hit's Mrs. Bedloe, ma'am. She's took bad and Sam's he's gone off. She's took to her bed and hollerin'. Sam, he come by to tell Ma." She ran out of breath and stopped suddenly.

"Where does Mrs. Bedloe live?" asked Lexie hurriedly.

Another chorus of shouts greeted the question, but Lexie understood that the Bedloe homestead was up the creek "a fur piece," a designation that might mean anything from one to five miles.

"I better go see her," she said doubtfully. She dreaded going. Suppose Mrs. Bedloe were really sick? What could she do for her? "How's the baby?" she asked.

"I bathed him," announced the girl proudly, "and he's clean all over. We knew you was comin' today. That's why Sam stopped by. Mrs. Bedloe, she's expectin', but she's took bad now."

"I'll go see her," repeated Lexie. "Tell your mother that Miss Mason will come tomorrow." She urged Cham forward and, amid a flurry of farewells, went on up the creek.

By dint of asking her way from people she met on the path, she found the Bedloe house about two miles along the trail. It stood on the top of a steep bank above the creek, and the path that led to it was very nearly vertical. Cham scrambled up unconcernedly with Lexie clinging to his mane. The yard was just at the top of the incline, and the house, a dingy, ill-cared-for cabin, stood in the midst of a varied jumble of old ironware and furniture. A scattering of chickens and pigs picked among the rubbish and dispersed with raucous squawks as Lexie rode forward. She saw some children playing under the high porch and others peering at her from the open door.

"How is your mother?" she called, as she tied Cham to a fence rail. "Where is she?"

Silence greeted her questions, but one small boy jerked his thumb toward the house. Taking this as a welcoming gesture, Lexie entered the house. The one room represented nothing but chaos to Lexie's first startled gaze. There were three double beds, several chairs, a bureau, and a small table jammed into the confined space. Three or four children stood staring at her and in one bed Lexie

saw a huge mountain of a woman, covered to the chin with a quilt. This obviously was Mrs. Bedloe, and there was no doubt that she was "in misery." A series of moans greeted Lexie, underscored with exclamations indicating sharper pain. Lexie advanced on the bed and looked down at the heavy face on the pillow. Mrs. Bedloe's dark eyes looked like raisins in a sea of dough and her multiple chins were a massive area of flesh.

"W-what's the matter?" stammered Lexie, trying not to show her nervousness. She knew very well what was the matter; Mrs. Bedloe's baby was likely to arrive at any minute.

Mrs. Bedloe merely looked at her. Two tears rolled down her fat cheeks. Wishing to look as professional as possible, Lexie took her pulse and temperature and found both normal. "Has your husband gone for the nurse?" she asked. "When did he leave?"

"Sam, he's gone to town," was the stoical reply. "Hit's a misery to him for me to suffer so."

Lexie caught her breath. "Why didn't he get the nurse?" she demanded. "Is there anyone else we can send?" She clenched her hands as though forcing herself to remain calm. None of the children in the house was old enough to send on an errand. What must she do? It would never do to let Mrs. Bedloe see that she was worried; she must do something. Lexie solved this immediate problem by taking Mrs. Bedloe's blood pressure as a means of appearing in charge of the situation. Instantly she wished she hadn't; Mrs. Bedloe's blood pressure was up and Lexie knew that it was dangerously high. The woman ought to get to the hospital

at once. But where was Sam, where was anyone whom she might send for Wilma? She dared not leave. It was her duty to stay by Mrs. Bedloe and help her if she could.

She glanced out the window and saw that the early dusk of the mountain country was already falling. It would be dark soon. Wilma must be notified. Another moan escaped Mrs. Bedloe, and then Lexie heard the sound of slow footsteps on the porch.

CHAPTER NINE

“WHO’s that?” Lexie knew that her voice was sharp with fear, but the footsteps forced the question from her.

Mrs. Bedloe raised her head from the pillow and listened. Then she sank back once more. “Thought likely hit war Sam,” she said wearily, “but he steps quick.”

The door swung open and a tiny old woman advanced into the room. For a moment Lexie had the startled impression that she must be a witch. Her face was brown and so interlaced with wrinkles that her sharp little features were almost hidden in them. Her hair was snow white and drawn tightly into a knot at the back of her head. The dark cotton dress she wore hung to the floor and was so stiffly starched that it seemed capable of standing alone. The little woman took one look at Mrs. Bedloe, glanced sharply at Lexie, and appeared to size up the situation at once.

“Hit’s her time,” she announced in a voice that was surprisingly deep. “Whar’s the ax?”

Lexie remembered the ax that was often placed under a patient's bed to cut pain. "I—I—" she began.

But the woman had no time for explanations. "Git hit," she commanded one of the children.

A small girl darted from the room and returned a moment later with a rusty hatchet. The woman slid it under the bed, then nodded her satisfaction. "Punishin' bad?" she asked Mrs. Bedloe in a conversational tone.

Mrs. Bedloe looked at Lexie. "Hit's Granny Larkin," she said. "She's cotched nigh onto a hundred babies in her time." She seemed relieved by the presence of the old midwife. "Mighty common of you to come by," she added in a more formal tone, gesturing to the old woman. "Take a chair."

Lexie, who realized that Mrs. Bedloe needed more skilled assistance than Granny Larkin was able to give, longed for Wilma. She knew that Mrs. Bedloe was registered at the center and that Wilma should be here now. More than once she had heard the nurses discussing cases such as this, and she knew that with a blood pressure as high as Mrs. Bedloe's she should have her baby in the hospital. But Granny Larkin was obviously prepared to do her duty without outside help and Lexie understood her well enough to realize that she would take any suggestions as an insult to her reputation as a midwife. She looked desperately around the room as though seeking inspiration and saw three small Bedloes huddled under the table near the fireplace. Their little faces wore a frightened look, and Lexie realized that they ought to be put to bed or sent to a neighbor's house.

"The children ought to—" But Lexie got no further. Granny Larkin was once again in charge.

"Annie!" Her voice rose to a bellow. "Annie, step in hyar."

A young woman, who looked so like a more youthful edition of Granny Larkin that Lexie knew she was her daughter, sidled through the door. But she had none of her mother's assurance and waited meekly for her orders. They were not long in coming.

"Git the young 'uns out of hyar. Git 'em along home and keep 'em thar until I tells you. Git now!" She turned and for the first time condescended to address a remark directly to Lexie. "We live a short piece up the road. Annie'll look to 'em."

Annie did her work quickly and within five minutes had marshaled all the children from the room and the porch. They went quietly, evidently too frightened of Granny Larkin to dream of protesting. The moment they were gone, Mrs. Bedloe took advantage of the lull to begin moaning once more.

"Oh Lordy," she gasped, "hit's punishin' me bad."

Granny Larkin merely leaned back in her chair by the bed and folded her hands. It was plain that she intended to do nothing but wait. Lexie saw the beads of perspiration on Mrs. Bedloe's face and her heart contracted with pity. She must do something. Perhaps, now that Granny Larkin was here, she could go for Wilma herself. At least the old woman had had some experience with such situations.

"I'm going for the nurse," she announced loudly. "Mrs.

Bedloe ought to go to the hospital. She's sick and needs help."

Something resembling a shriek arose from the bed. "Hospital! I won't hear on hit. I won't."

"Thar now." Granny Larkin spoke soothingly. "Hit's pure nonsense that hospital. You'll bide right hyar. Rest quiet."

Lexie did not attempt to argue. She realized she had made a mistake in mentioning the hospital. Wilma, when she arrived, would be able to deal with that problem. Lexie slipped out the door without saying farewell and ran for the fence where she had tied Cham. Her fingers fumbled at the knotted reins and she yanked them impatiently. It was already dark; the ride to the center was going to be bad enough without the delay of fussing with the slippery reins. She was mounted at last and was turning to go down the steep incline to the creek trail when she saw a light flash up at her from the path below. For a second Lexie's heart stopped entirely, then she forced herself to call out.

"Who's there?" She knew her voice quavered, but she was past caring.

"Lexie!" It was Wilma's unmistakable voice and a great surge of relief swept over Lexie. Somehow she had heard of the emergency and by a miracle had arrived just when she was most needed.

"Wilma! How did you know? I was just coming for you. Hurry up, for heaven's sake! Mrs. Bedloe's blood pressure is miles up and she's in a state."

Lexie heard the sound of horse's hoofs on the incline and a minute later Wilma was beside her. "Sam stopped by to tell me. I was afraid of that blood pressure," said Wilma. "We'll have to get her to the hospital. Anybody there?" Already Wilma seemed in full charge of the situation.

Wilma had tied her horse and, with her saddlebags on her shoulder, was going toward the house. She bounded along so quickly that Lexie had to skip to keep up with her.

"Granny Larkin's there," Lexie managed to reply, before Wilma reached the porch. "She's taken charge."

Wilma chuckled. "We're old friends. Come on in."

They found the room just as Lexie had left it. Mrs. Bedlow was moaning beneath her mound of quilts and Granny Larkin rocking comfortably at the bedside.

"Granny, how nice to see you here," cried Wilma immediately. She put her hand on the old woman's shoulder and smiled down at her. "How is she?" she asked softly, nodding toward the bed. It was as though Wilma were asking Granny to share the responsibility of the patient.

"Punishin' bad," was the satisfied reply.

Wilma had her saddlebags open almost before Granny Larkin finished speaking. She took Mrs. Bedloe's blood pressure and Lexie saw a tiny frown mark her smooth, tanned forehead. But she said nothing to show that she was worried and leaned down to speak a few reassuring words to Mrs. Bedloe.

"You'll be all right," she said briskly. "We've had lots

ot babies, haven t we, Mrs. Bedloe? I here was a note of cheer behind the firm confidence in her voice.

Mrs. Bedloe, who had stopped moaning, managed to nod. "Seems like I'm punishin' worse now," she said.

Wilma turned to Granny Larkin. "Granny," she said, "you must help me. Where's Sam? Is Alf at home, or Bill?"

"Sam's took off," said Granny. "The boys is home. Want 'em? I kin holler'em up fer ye."

Wilma nodded. "Listen, Granny," she said, forcing her high voice to a whisper. "Mrs. Bedloe has to have the doctor. She has to go to the hospital. No, please listen."

Granny had started to protest, but Wilma's plea silenced her.

"You know what the doctor did for your rheumatism. We need him now. You tell the boys to come. Alf can take his car and drive Mrs. Bedloe in to the hospital. Please help me make Mrs. Bedloe go." Lexie caught the urgency of her appeal, the necessity of enlisting Granny's help.

Granny grunted, but she rose from her chair and moved to the door. A moment later a bellow arose from the porch that made Lexie leap from the chair where she was sitting. "*Alf! Bill!*" The summons echoed down the hollow and seemed to roll on the hills beyond.

"Granny can make people hear for miles," said Wilma. "Her house is just down the creek. Bill and Alf will hear all right. They're her sons and they mind their mother, I assure you." She smiled and nodded at Lexie in a way that made her look more than ever like a lively elf.

Lexie had no doubt of this. Granny Larkin was not the

sort of person to take either a refusal or an argument to her commands.

While they waited for Alf and Bill, Wilma did what she could to make Mrs. Bedloe comfortable. She got her patient to take a pill that would ease her pain and smoothed the blanket and pillow. Mrs. Bedloe continued to groan, but now Lexie suspected that there was an overtone of self-pity in her voice. She guessed that Mrs. Bedloe was taking full advantage of the attention she was receiving.

"How are you going to get her to the hospital?" whispered Lexie. Wilma was at the fireplace, attempting to poke some life into the burning chunks of coal, and Lexie leaned down beside her to ask her question.

"Stretcher," said Wilma. "The men will carry her to Alf's car which he keeps down the creek a way where the logging road begins. It's going to be a job, but we've done this sort of thing before. Oh, hello, Granny. Did the boys hear you?" She turned toward Granny with her wide, friendly smile.

Granny Larkin nodded emphatically. "'Pears likely. Seen a light on the walkin' road 'soon's I hollered. Punishin' right smart, hain't she?" She nodded toward the bed.

"The doctor will take care of her," said Wilma. "Oh, here are the boys now."

Heavy feet scraped on the porch and two men appeared in the doorway. Lexie's first thought was to wonder why either of them could be called "a boy" any longer. Both were middle-aged men, one tall and almost painfully thin and the other a plump individual with a round, red face

and a completely bald head. They wore worn and faded overalls and their heavy shoes were caked with mud.

"Alf!" Granny pointed a gnarled finger at the tall man. "You and Bill make up a carryin' bed. We're totin' Mrs. Bedloe to the doctor. Git movin'."

The "boys" nodded and, without a word, left the room. They returned a short time later with four poles, two short and two long. With Wilma's help they constructed a stretcher, using two blankets from one of the beds and a multitude of pins. Mrs. Bedloe seemed oblivious to the preparations in her behalf and lay, with her eyes closed, moaning softly. Granny assisted with a stream of advice and directions which her sons obeyed to the letter. When the stretcher was as strong as Wilma's ingenuity could make it, she motioned to Alf and Bill to move it to the side of the bed.

For the first time Bill spoke. "Can't tote her nohow," he announced. "Powerful heavy, Mrs. Bedlow. Need another man."

"But with you two and Miss Littleton and me we can do it," exclaimed Wilma. "We can each take a corner. How far is it to the car?"

"'Bout a mile or so. Down by the sawmill. We need another man." He looked to Alf for confirmation and then both men looked at Lexie. Alf said nothing but he shook his head. It was Bill who announced flatly, "She hain't up to hit—not a puny miss like her."

"I'm not puny," declared Lexie hotly. "I can help carry her."

Alf shook his head again and Lexie heard Wilma sigh.

"There's no use arguing," she told Lexie in an aside. Then more loudly, "Who can we get? If only Sam were here."

"Sam's took off," said Bill. "He hain't up to seein' his woman in misery." There was no criticism of Sam's defection in Bill's voice; he evidently took Sam's delicacy of feeling as quite natural.

"There's Mr. Corey," said Lexie. "He lives just down the creek."

She was surprised at her own suggestion the moment she had made it. There was no reason to think that the dour Mr. Corey would be willing to lend his assistance. She knew from the expression on the men's faces that they felt much as she did. Alf frowned and Bill shook his head.

"He's powerful mean," said Bill, "but there hain't another man in the holler. I wouldn't ask him."

"Lexie, is that the family you told me about?" asked Wilma, turning on Lexie, her bright eyes alight with new hope.

Lexie nodded miserably. She knew what Wilma was about to suggest.

"Will you go ask him? You know him; he might come for you. One of the boys will go with you. There's a path over the hill. If you go that way, it's only about half a mile. You'll have to walk as Alf hasn't a mule." There was a note of pleading in her request and Lexie knew that she was nervous over the delay in getting Mrs. Bedloe started on her way. "Will you, please?"

There was no way of refusing her and Lexie did not try to find an excuse. The thought of the trip over a mountain trail with one of the "boys" as a companion, to say

nothing of the reception she might receive at the Corey's, did not bear contemplation. Her one faint hope, as she pulled on her jacket, was that Bill, rather than Alf, might be her guide. Alf was so grimly silent that he made her wonder what dark secrets he might be concealing behind his taciturnity.

But this hope was soon doomed. Granny Larkin nodded preemptorily at Alf. "You go, Alf. Bill's slow. Take the lantern and git."

Alf turned and walked out the door without a word, picking up the lantern from the porch as he went. He did not even look to see whether Lexie was behind him. Lexie sent one expressive glance in Wilma's direction and ran after him. Much as she dreaded Alf's company, it would never do to let him out of her sight. The murky glow from the lantern bobbed along ahead of her as she crossed the yard, stumbling over the miscellany of junk that littered it. Alf walked as quickly as his mother had intimated. His long legs seemed to cover a good six feet with every stride and he never once slackened pace to accommodate himself to Lexie's steps. He turned up the hill behind the house, still maintaining the same rate of speed.

Lexie gave up all thought of walking. She had to run even to keep the lantern in sight, and by the time she reached the top of the hill she was panting for breath. But Alf was still ahead of her and already halfway down the hill on the other side. Lexie half-ran, half-slid after him, her breath coming in gasps. She longed to call out to Alf to wait for her, but she did not dare. Then, too, her pride demanded that she not show her weakness in any way.

Both Alf and Bill had already pronounced her too "puny" to help with the stretcher. It would be unthinkable to let Alf know that she couldn't keep up with him after that other slap to her self-esteem.

Fortunately the small path was easy to follow, even in the dim light of the lantern. It led through a cleared field on the opposite side of the hill and then across a patch of thin woods. Alf slowed of his own accord as they reached the wooded area and Lexie realized for the first time that he was conscious of her presence. He recognized her need of the light in the woods and waited for her to catch up with him. As soon as she reached his side, however, he strode forward at his usual pace and Lexie raced at his heels.

They came out on the creek trail a few minutes later and Lexie was amazed to discover that they were only a short distance from the Corey house. It was over two miles by the trail, but by using the path over the mountain, they had cut the trip to less than a mile.

Alf led the way to the fence surrounding the Corey's yard and then stopped. Wordlessly he handed the lantern to Lexie and nodded to show that he expected her to go on to the house alone. Lexie took it with shaking fingers and looked pleadingly up into Alf's face. But he turned away and was soon lost in contemplation of the mountain-top across the creek. His utter indifference to her possible fate angered Lexie suddenly. It was obvious that he had no wish to approach that dark and silent house but was quite willing that she should. Well, she would show him! She

might be puny, but she wasn't a coward. She cast a look of withering scorn toward Alf, a look that was entirely wasted on the back of his head, and opened the rickety gate with a wrench.

It was not until she was halfway across the yard that she began to wonder what she would say to Mr. Corey, how she would make her request. She had never addressed a word to him, and the last time she had seen him he had been carrying a rifle. A mental picture of his fierce, dark face flashed into her memory and she gave a little groan. She turned and looked hopefully toward Alf, but he was still studying the farther landscape. His apathy spurred her on and brought Lexie to the porch steps. The house was completely dark and a particularly ominous silence seemed to hang over its looming bulk.

Lexie took a few tentative steps and reached the porch. A hideous clattering crash greeted her the moment her foot hit the shaking floor boards. To Lexie's startled imagination it sounded as though a thousand tin pans were falling about her ears. In the lantern light she saw that she had disturbed a heap of rusty ironware that had been piled on the porch. But the noise was nothing to the next sound that reached her ears. It was the unmistakable click of a rifle being cocked and it came from behind the closed door. Lexie felt her throat close and she struggled to call out. If she did not identify herself, Mr. Corey might shoot and ask questions afterward.

A ruffle of whispered words reached her next and she recognized Mrs. Corey's timid voice. "Hit's a hant! Hit

shore is a hant!" There was no doubt that Mrs. Corey was frightened and quite sure that the visitor on the porch was from another world.

Before Lexie could affirm her mortal status, Mr. Corey spoke. "Git from thar!" he commanded in a voice that Lexie was certain would terrify even a spirit. "Git from thar, I say. We're Christian folk, we are, and want no truck with hants." The rifle clicked again in a threatening way.

Lexie found her voice at last. Suddenly the idea that she was mistaken for a ghost annoyed her and she shouted, "I'm not a hant! I'm Miss Littleton from the center. Please, Mrs. Corey, open the door."

Dead silence greeted her announcement. Then came more whispers and, from their tone, Lexie guessed that Mrs. Corey was pleading with her husband to open the door. After what seemed an age, the door opened an inch or so and the muzzle of a rifle gleamed from the crack. Lexie took a long, slow breath.

"Please let me speak to you," she begged. "It's an emergency and we need help."

Instantly the door swung wider and in the lantern's light Lexie saw Mr. and Mrs. Corey standing before her. Mrs. Corey was huddled in a faded wrapper, but Mr. Corey was fully dressed in the overalls and dark jacket that Lexie had seen him wear before. He held the rifle in the crook of his arm, but it was evident that he was quite prepared to use it for the defense of his home and family if need be. Neither of them spoke; they waited for Lexie to explain her call.

In a few words she told what she wanted. As final proof of the truth of her statement, she gestured toward Alf who still stood with his back to the gate. When she finished, Lexie wondered why she had ever thought Mr. Corey would respond to this call for help. Nothing she had seen or heard of him gave her the slightest hope that he would do what she asked. He was silent for a moment when Lexie stopped speaking. Lexie saw Mrs. Corey's thin hand reach out and touch his arm in a pleading gesture, but he seemed not to notice it.

Then suddenly in the heavy, harsh voice that was so fearful in Lexie's ears, he announced, "Hit's my Christian duty. 'Do unto others as ye would be done by.'" He raised one hand as he spoke the last words, then walked straight past Lexie toward the gate.

She had time only for a hasty farewell to Mrs. Corey, before she ran after him. Mr. Corey walked faster, if anything, than Alf. With a short "Howdy" he had pushed past Alf and now the two men were striding along the path ahead of her. But Lexie had the advantage of holding the lantern now. Though she had to run to keep them in sight, her way was lighted. The trip back to the Bedloe house seemed even shorter than before. All during the walk over the mountain neither of the men ahead of her exchanged a word. Both Alf and Mr. Corey evidently took no stock in conversation.

Wilma was watching for them from the Bedloe's porch, fairly jumping up and down with impatience. "How good of you to come," she said to Mr. Corey. "We need your help so much. I am Miss Mason from the nursing center."

She smiled up at him as though greeting an old friend.

Mr. Corey grunted and, without waiting to be asked, walked into the house. He seemed to understand at once what was needed of him and took his place by one corner of the stretcher.

"Mrs. Bedloe," said Wilma, bending over the bed. "We're ready now. Please sit up and I'll help you onto the stretcher." She spoke firmly as though there could be no argument over what her patient must do.

The quilts heaved and Mrs. Bedloe sat upright with surprising agility. She took one look at the three men waiting by the stretcher, gave a heart-rending moan and sank back. "I hain't goin'. I hain't leavin' this house," she announced flatly.

Wilma made a hopeless gesture with her hands, and for the first time Lexie saw that she seemed uncertain of what to do or say. Then she looked at Granny Larkin as though turning the problem over to her.

From the expression on her wrinkled face it was plain that Granny was enjoying the situation hugely. Her bright little eyes were alight and her lips twitched. She rocked placidly in her chair for a long minute as though savoring the affair to the full. When it was quite obvious to her that everyone was waiting for her to take some action and that the success or failure of Wilma's endeavors depended on her, Granny Larkin took command. She jumped out of her chair and advanced on the bed with a purposeful stride.

"Git up from thar," she ordered. "Tessie Bedloe, you

should feel shame, actin' thisaway. Git from thar, I say, and git quick."

Mrs. Bedloe sat bolt upright and stared at Granny. Then without another word, and without anyone's help, she slid out of bed and stood by the stretcher. She wore a man's flannel bathrobe wrapped about her massive form and, in Lexie's eyes, she was three times the size of an ordinary woman. With Wilma's help she lay down on the stretcher and a blanket was tucked around her. She seemed to be mesmerized by Granny Larkin who never took her eyes from her, but once on the stretcher she gathered courage to say, "Who's goin' to tend the children? Sam hain't goin' to favor my goin'." Her voice was tearful.

"Annie'll tend'em, and Sam, too," was Granny's reply. "Git along now. Hit's no time fer idle talk."

The men bent down to lift their burden with Wilma and Lexie taking the fourth handle of the stretcher. Granny stood back and watched them move slowly to the door. It was evident that she viewed the entire proceeding as her work and one in which she took considerable pride.

"Thank you, Granny," said Wilma, as they left. "You've been wonderful." Her voice softened in a way that showed she meant what she said.

"Humph," snorted Granny. "Hit war nothin'." But her pleased expression belied her words. The last Lexie saw of her, she was standing in the doorway watching them cross the yard, and even at this distance Lexie knew that she was congratulating herself on a job well done.

"What about the horses?" asked Lexie in a low voice as

they went out the gate. She stumbled as she spoke and slid forward on the downward slope.

"Hold the pole with one hand. You'll balance better," replied Wilma. "This hill will be the hardest part; it won't be bad once we reach the trail. I'll have to come back for the horses after you go."

"I go!" Lexie stumbled again and righted herself with difficulty. "I—" But they had reached the steep path to the trail now and Lexie had all she could do to keep her hold on the pole and her feet firmly on the ground. To add to their troubles, Mrs. Bedloe began to moan once more, as though every motion of the stretcher were a source of agony.

They reached the trail at last, but Lexie was sure that all five of them had slid rather than walked down the incline.

"What did you mean?" demanded Lexie in a hoarse whisper, once they were on the flat ground.

"I'm sending you in the car with Mrs. Bedloe," was the brisk reply. "Alf will drive, and you ought to get there in a couple of hours. The road from here to Dry Hill is pretty bad, only a logging road, but you'll make good time from there."

"But—but—" Lexie could not go on. The thought of driving in to the hospital with a sick woman and the silent Alf was too appalling for mere words. What if anything happened to Mrs. Bedloe before they reached the hospital?

Wilma seemed to understand her worries without the necessity of words. "Listen," she said softly, under cover

of Mrs. Bedloe's groans, "she isn't as bad off as she acts. Her baby probably won't come until tomorrow; it isn't due yet anyway. But this blood pressure complication is worrying and I want the doctor to take charge of her. I can't leave now or I'd go in with her. Timmy had a bad headache when I left and I'm afraid she's getting the flu. Alf will bring you back with him. I'm going to need you more than ever."

Lexie gave up all thought of further protest. Wilma's explanation made one impossible in any case. She was the one available person to undertake the task and a small glow of pride that Wilma would entrust it to her began to surmount her nervousness. This was a job that must be done and it was up to her to see that Mrs. Bedloe was safely delivered to the hospital, no matter what the difficulties might be.

During the slow trip to the sawmill where Alf kept his car, Wilma gave Lexie instructions as to what to tell the hospital authorities and what she could do to make Mrs. Bedloe comfortable during the journey. "Just keep her spirits up is the main thing," she said. "She will be all right and Alf will get you there safely." Her airy voice made the coming trip seem something of a pleasure jaunt.

Lexie nodded, but already her imagination was picturing a hundred possible emergencies that would demand her thought and energy to solve. Alf would be no help, she was sure of that. He would just say nothing and expect her to deal with all situations and problems. All during the hour's walk to the car none of the men spoke a word. Except for Lexie and Wilma's brief talk and Mrs. Bedloe's

moans, the trip was utterly silent and entirely uneventful. They stopped to rest every ten minutes, then went on again, keeping as brisk a pace as their burden allowed. The lantern which Alf carried was their only light, but the trail was fairly smooth and they could see their footing well enough.

The car, which was housed under a shed by the sawmill, proved to be a Model T Ford of such ancient vintage that Lexie wondered if it were possible that such a machine could run. Its towering top stood seven feet from the ground, a tattered cloth covering that offered only a token protection from the weather. Two doors were gone, one of them leading to the back seat where she and Mrs. Bedloe were soon established. Wilma tucked a blanket about her patient and soothed her last fretful complaints with a few reassuring words.

"Miss Littleton will take care of you," Lexie heard her say. "I hope—" But Lexie never knew what Wilma's last wish was. A shattering roar broke from the engine in response to Alf's efforts with the crank. She saw him leap for the throttle by the wheel and the sound lulled to a thudding hum. Alf slid under the wheel and, without a word or gesture of farewell, jerked the car into motion.

Lexie leaned out to wave at Wilma and the two men. She saw that Mr. Corey had already turned away and was striding up the path toward home. Bill and Wilma were evidently shouting good-bye but their words were lost in the rattle of the engine. A moment later the car shot forward and swung onto the rutted road that followed beside the creek. The headlights cast a feeble beam ahead, so dim

that Lexie wondered how Alf could see the way. But he appeared to have no need of light; he drove as rapidly as he walked. The car fairly leaped over the ruts, tossing both Lexie and Mrs. Bedloe into a heap on the back seat.

"Go slower!" shrieked Lexie. "Mrs. Bedloe—" But she knew that Alf either did not hear or had no intention of heeding her. The car went faster if anything, jolting hideously over the deep ruts. Lexie resigned herself to the inevitable. All she could do was make the trip as easy as possible for Mrs. Bedloe. She wrapped the blanket more firmly about her and urged her to sit in one corner of the seat where she could cling to the side of the car. One happy result of Alf's driving method was to make it nearly impossible for Mrs. Bedloe to make a sound. She was too busy maintaining her balance on the seat to have time for tears or moans.

Lexie knew when they reached the mouth of Wilder Creek and turned up the river road toward Hyden. She saw the lights of the center when they passed and had a fleeting longing to be inside in the warmth and comfort of the familiar living room. But the lights disappeared behind them almost before she formed the thought and Lexie wondered when she would see them again. The road was even worse beside the Middle Fork, a mere suggestion of a track that was used infrequently by logging and supply trucks. The car jolted and rattled so alarmingly that Lexie was sure that at the next bump it would disintegrate entirely. The lights, feeble at best, flickered and even went out momentarily in the worst ruts. Lexie clung to one side of the car and wished she knew whether her backbone was

permanently dislocated or merely wrenched. She felt sorry for Mrs. Bedloe, but her patient made no protests and Lexie supposed she was suffering in silence.

Suddenly and without any warning whatsoever the front wheels hit an obstruction in the road, the lights flicked and went out and the car tipped slowly and relentlessly to one side. Lexie slid off the seat to the floor as the engine gave a sputtering gasp and stopped.

CHAPTER TEN

LEXIE's first thought was that Mrs. Bedloe must surely have been so jolted by this latest catastrophe that her baby could no longer put off its arrival. From her position on the floor of the car she could see Mrs. Bedloe huddled above her on the seat, a dark mass in the gloom. Fortunately the car had slid down on the side Mrs. Bedloe was sitting so that she had merely become more firmly wedged on the seat.

"Mrs. Bedloe, are you all right?" demanded Lexie, struggling to untangle herself from the blanket at her patient's feet. "What in the world happened?"

"Reckon so," was the calm response. "Don't feel different nohow." In the face of an emergency Mrs. Bedloe was surprisingly unconcerned about herself. She seemed to feel that the accident was quite in the ordinary run of things and she had completely forgotten to moan. Lexie even heard a faint chuckle from the heap of blankets above her. "Hit's the wheel," she announced. "Hit's natural to hit. Alf's got on to fixin' hit."

When Lexie climbed over the side of the car to the road,

she discovered that Alf appeared to be taking the situation as calmly as Mrs. Bedloe. Without a word he had lighted the lantern and was inspecting the bare axle that rested in the dirt at the roadside. The defaulting wheel had rolled into the ditch some distance ahead of the car.

"What about the lights?" asked Lexie, who found it faintly annoying to have both Alf and Mrs. Bedloe take their predicament so lightly. She knew that it was important that Mrs. Bedloe reach the hospital as quickly as possible; now they might be delayed indefinitely or even permanently stalled by the roadside.

But Alf did not answer. He extracted a jack from beneath the front seat and worked it under the axle. A few minutes later the car with Mrs. Bedloe in it began to rise slowly from its tilted angle. Alf did not even look at Lexie. Without his telling her she held the lantern near him so that he might see what he was doing. But neither by word nor action did he show that he appreciated or even noticed what she was doing. It remained for Mrs. Bedloe to explain about the lights.

"The lamps is faulty," she said. "Once we gits goin' agin, they's likely to light up. They's shaken into hit."

Lexie could well believe that, but it seemed a casual system of running a car. If Alf had to depend on the jolts of the road to keep the lights lit, it did not promise much in the way of steady illumination.

Alf worked quickly. He had the wheel on and affixed with two or three screws with all the ease of one who has had much practice in the job. Once the car was on an even

keel, he took the lantern from Lexie and disappeared into the darkness.

"Where's he gone?" asked Lexie, who had taken her place by Mrs. Bedloe once more. "He hasn't just left us, has he?"

"Hit's the engine," was the reply. "Hit has an uncommon way with hit. Drinks water like a hoss. Don't you fret. Alf'll git agoin' right quick."

Lexie tucked the blanket around Mrs. Bedloe, then sat back to wait with what patience she could muster. She dared not ask Mrs. Bedloe how she was feeling, for fear of rousing her self-pity once more. Mrs. Bedloe appeared to have forgotten her miseries; the accident was plainly a source of amusement and interest to her and she was enjoying the diversion. Lexie noticed that she sat up straighter and no longer kept her arms wrapped about herself as though hugging her pain.

"Hyar he is," announced Mrs. Bedloe at last. "Bin down to the river fer water." She nodded toward the lantern light which bobbed toward them from the river bank.

Alf was carrying a dripping bucketful of water which he poured into the parched radiator. A cloud of steam arose from the engine and an ominous hissing sound greeted the cooling water.

"Won't you crack it?" asked Lexie anxiously.

But Alf paid no attention to her objection. He slammed down the hood and began to crank the engine. To Lexie's amazement and relief it started with only a few minor protests, and within a few moments the jolting trip was once more in progress. Lexie sank back on the seat and resigned

herself to anything that might happen. The lights, in accordance with Mrs. Bedloe's prophecy, came on again after they had gone a short distance, but all during the trip they flickered on and off at irregular intervals. Lexie had no idea how Alf saw the road, but she was past caring or wondering. He seemed to have a supernatural way of seeing in the dark in any case, and she soon ceased to worry when they drove in total darkness.

Once they reached the improved dirt road at Dry Hill they made better time. Alf drove even faster than before, and with no ruts to hinder them they fairly flew over the road. The only delays occurred when a warning hiss came from the engine, a signal that Alf had learned to recognize. He stopped the car and got water from the river for the leaking radiator. Once this reviving fluid had been administered the car went on as easily as before. Lexie began to understand something of the affection with which she had heard people refer to the old Model T Fords. Nothing seemed to bother the car, and she was quite sure that it could run without gas, oil, or any of the necessities demanded by a modern car.

It was nearly nine o'clock when they reached Hyden and turned up the hill that led to the hospital. Lexie was out of the car the moment it panted to a halt before the door. In the past few minutes she had begun to worry that there would be no one at hand to receive her patient, or that Nancy Edwards would be off duty and she would have to explain Mrs. Bedloe's needs to a strange nurse.

But Nancy must have heard the car on the hill for she was at the door to greet Lexie, just as she had been that

first day when Lexie came to Hyden. Before Lexie could say a word she glanced at the car and evidently knew why it was there and what it contained.

"A case for the doctor? We'll have a bed ready right away. What is the complication?" She was as cool, her voice with its fresh English lightness as unperturbed, as though nothing unusual were happening.

Lexie explained as clearly as she could. Nancy, who had already called two other nurses, listened and nodded.

"We'll take care of her. Wilma told us that we might have Mrs. Bedloe with us. The doctor has seen her before and everything will be all right, I'm sure. Come along, we'll help her in." She nodded to the nurses, who followed her out to the car.

Within a remarkably short time Mrs. Bedloe had been assisted from the car. Lexie did what she could to help and noted, as she guided Mrs. Bedloe up the steps, that the moans had begun again. Now that she was the center of attention once more, Mrs. Bedloe evidently could not resist the opportunity to show what she was suffering. Nancy talked to her cheerfully and reassuringly, but it was plain that Mrs. Bedloe felt she was leaving the known world behind her once she was within the hospital walls.

"Will she be all right?" asked Lexie anxiously, as she watched Mrs. Bedloe being led away by one of the nurses.

"I think so. A blood pressure as high as hers is worrying, but we'll have the doctor see her right away. You'd best hurry along. I see your driver beckoning to you."

Lexie saw Alf signaling to her from the doorway. By

jerking his head over his shoulder he was obviously trying to tell her that he was ready to start back. Lexie waved to show that she understood, thinking as she did so that it was quite unnecessary to speak to Alf when signals and gestures served their purpose so well.

"Sorry I have to rush," she said. "You'll let us know how Mrs. Bedloe makes out, won't you?"

Nancy nodded. "Oh, here," she called, as Lexie reached the door. "I'm frightfully sorry; I nearly forgot your letters. Someone brought them over from Wendover, thinking we might have a chance to send them on to Confluence." She handed a small bundle of mail to Lexie. "And do tell Wilma that we're doing our best about a relief nurse."

"Relief nurse?" Lexie looked puzzled.

"Wilma sent in word that she was afraid Timmy was getting rather run down. If she should get the flu, the district would be too much for you and Wilma."

"Wilma told me Timmy had a headache just as I was leaving. She's probably coming down with it; she's been working like mad. Goodness, who can they send?"

"We don't know yet. We'll have to consult with Wendover, but we should be able to let Wilma know what we can do in a day or two. Good luck, and don't *you* get the flu."

Lexie started to reply, but a raucous squawk from outside told her that Alf was getting impatient. He was now using the Ford's horn to tell her that he was waiting. She waved a farewell and ran out the door. But once in the back seat, she had time to see in the light from the door

that the letter on top of the pile in her hand was from Mark. The anticipation of reading the letter once she reached Confluence was enough to buoy her spirits for some distance along the way.

Alf took the same route home and the trip was almost a replica of the journey in to Hyden. Fortunately the wheels remained intact, but the customary stops for water had to be repeated whenever the engine gave its admonitory hiss. Lexie made no attempt to talk with Alf; she knew now that conversation was wasted upon him.

They reached Dry Hill and struck the logging road once more, a circumstance that jolted Lexie into a realization that they were nearing home. She had been lost in her own thoughts for the last few miles, wondering what was in Mark's letter and wishing that he were with her to enjoy the beauty of the night. The moon had risen, flooding the hillsides with a clear white light and making the river look like a broad and shining ribbon. Now it did not matter whether the temperamental lights worked or not; the way was brightly lighted by the moon.

A jarring thud forced her to clutch at the side of the car and she noticed for the first time that Alf did not seem to be sitting as stiffly upright as he had before. He was slumped a little to one side and his head bobbed with every motion of the car. Lexie leaned forward and prodded him sharply in the back.

"Wake up!" she cried. "Wake up, I say!"

Alf straightened up as though jerked by a string. He gave no indication that he had heard her warning, but it was plain that Lexie had caught him just as he was nod-

ding off to sleep. Lexie was fully conscious of the latest threat to their safety now and balanced on the edge of the seat to be ready to shake Alf's shoulder if he showed signs of falling asleep again. Alf seemed fully aware of her alert position behind him and sat up very straight with his eyes fixed on the road.

For several miles he maintained this vigilant pose and Lexie's fears relaxed. She sat back in the seat and once again let her thoughts wander to Mark and his letter. It was very nearly the last of March; she had been at Wendover almost a month. It seemed a lifetime. So much had happened; she had so much to tell him that no letters could convey. She remembered how she had dreaded coming and how she had wondered whether she would like it. She smiled in the darkness. Liking Wendover was such a tame way of expressing what she felt about the place and its people.

Lexie's train of thought was broken by a violent leap of the car. She had time only to clutch at the doorframe with both hands before the car slewed off the road and plunged downward amid a splintering crackle of brushwood. Lexie did not need to see to know that Alf had fallen asleep and that the car had gone off the road, headed for she knew not what. She felt the wheels strike some obstruction and heard the sound of rending wood. Then, with a bone-rattling crash, the car came to a stop. Lexie picked herself up from the floor where she had been thrown, too angry with Alf to know or care whether she was hurt. She could move, so it must be that no bones were broken.

In the the moonlight she saw the outline of Alf's head and shoulders before her. He was awake now; she was sure of that, but he made no sound to indicate what he felt about this last and most calamitous of the accidents that had befallen them. Angered by his apparent indifference, Lexie jumped out of the car and immediately sank to her ankles in a sea of mud.

"You—you—" Lexie glared at Alf, who was slowly climbing out of the car. Then an unmistakable aroma reached her nose. It was the compelling scent of pigs, and pigs who were at very close quarters. Instantly Lexie understood where she was; she did not need to hear the snorting grunt behind her to know where the car had landed. Lexie did not wait to learn anything more. She made a flying leap for the broken fence and climbed hastily over it. Looking behind her she could see in the moonlight that the Ford had landed squarely in the middle of a pigsty and that a cluster of curious pigs was gathering to survey this invader of their privacy.

Alf placed one hand on the car and shook it tentatively. He seemed unperturbed by the disaster and only somewhat puzzled as to what had brought him to this porcine haven.

"You fell asleep," exclaimed Lexie accusingly. "Now, how are you going to get the car out of this?" The bank behind her was steep and already the Ford's wheels were sinking deeper into the muck.

Alf shrugged his shoulders, then, to Lexie's amazement, climbed back into the car and slumped down as though prepared to finish his nap. It was evident that he had no

intention of facing the problem of extracting his car from the pigpen until a later date.

Lexie turned on her heel, too annoyed to speak another word. There was only one thing to do and that was to walk the rest of the way to Confluence. She reached the road after a wild scramble up the bank and discovered that she recognized where she was. The house a short distance up the road was familiar and Lexie knew that she was nearly three miles from the center. The moon lighted the road so that it was almost as bright as day and she would have no difficulty finding her way. She set out at a brisk pace, still so aggravated at Alf's carelessness that she walked more quickly than usual. After a few minutes the full humor of the situation began to overcome her annoyance. The memory of Alf as he climbed back into the car, so stolidly indifferent to his surroundings, was too much for her. Lexie began to laugh. She remembered that never once since she had first seen Alf had he spoken a word and she had been with him for what seemed to be hours. All during the hour's walk to Confluence Lexie maintained her cheerful view of her night's adventure. It would be something to write Mark. She wished he were with her now, so that she might tell him all about it.

It was after midnight when Lexie reached Confluence. Wilma heard her come in and met her at the head of the stairs with a flashlight.

"Shh!"

Lexie saw Wilma's finger raised in a warning sign. "Timmy's asleep. She's really got the flu, poor girl, and feels horribly. How did everything go?"

In the kitchen over a midnight snack Lexie related her adventures; Alf and his abilities as a driver lost nothing in her account. She relayed Nancy's message about the relief nurse, fully appreciative now of the necessity of having someone to help them with the district work.

"We'll have to do the best we can until they send someone. Poor Timmy will be out of the running for a week or so. Do you think you can handle most of the health calls?"

Lexie nodded, trying not to look important. "I hope so," she said simply.

"Good girl. We'd better get to bed now. Until the relief nurse comes, we may not get much sleep."

Before she went to bed Lexie read her letters, saving Mark's until the last. This time he made no mention of Eleanor Payne, and this fact alone was sufficient to send Lexie to sleep in a happier frame of mind about Mark's possible feeling for Eleanor.

April 7—

Dear Mark:

I still don't know why I try to write letters to anybody—there simply isn't time, especially now. I've been at Confluence a week and sometimes I don't know whether I'm asleep or awake. The past few days have been a perfect buzz, but it's funny how I don't feel tired. I guess there isn't time to think how you feel. I wrote you about my trip into Hyden with the silent Alf. Incidentally his car is still in the pigpen. I saw it there, sunk in mud to the hubcaps, a couple of days ago when I rode down that way to take some

medicine to a house near there. Granny Larkin told Wilma that Alf is "studyin' to git hit out," but I suppose that will be any time between now and next winter. Mrs. Bedloe is doing fine; she had a nine-pound boy the morning after she reached the hospital and Eleanor told us that it was lucky she got to the hospital. She had a bad time. Oh, I guess I haven't told you that Eleanor Payne is the relief nurse they sent to us.

Lexie put down her pen and looked closely at the last sentence she had written. Perhaps it was too casual, but she saw no necessity for expanding on Eleanor's presence. She remembered what her sensations had been when Wilma received word that Eleanor was coming to Confluence. Some of her joy at being there had gone when she heard the news. Lexie could never quite overcome the feeling that Eleanor looked upon her more or less as Aunt Em did; as a "flibbertygibbet," someone who never had a serious thought in her head or took any real interest in her work. Eleanor was so entirely efficient herself, so completely mistress of her actions and emotions, that Lexie was always conscious of the contrast between them and its significance in Mark's eyes. She knew that she could never be as efficient as Eleanor no matter how hard she tried. As for achieving Eleanor's monumental calm of manner, Lexie had sense enough to realize that she could never hope for that. But Mark evidently admired Eleanor for what she was, and Eleanor Payne was not at all like Lexie Littleton. Having

Eleanor near by to remind her of all this was not something that Lexie could look forward to.

Eleanor had ridden to Confluence by way of Dry Hill, reaching there the second day after Lexie's momentous trip to Hyden. Since that time Lexie had had very little opportunity to become better acquainted with her. Both Eleanor and Wilma were out all day on calls and at night everyone was too tired to be very sociable. They went to bed early to be ready for the next day's work.

Lexie tried to think of something else she could tell Mark about Eleanor and at last decided to stick to the bare facts of her presence and the work they were all doing at the center. She reread what she had written, then bent over the paper once more.

She's been a wonderful help, of course. In a way it's too bad they couldn't send a nurse-midwife, as Wilma has to handle all the baby cases now that Timmy is sick. But Eleanor is the only nurse they could spare and she and I have been dividing the health calls between us. By this time I think I could qualify as a nurse myself—that is, a “flu nurse,” if there is such a thing. Most of my calls have been on flu cases. Wilma gets word that someone in the district is “hurtin’ bad” and she sends me out on dear old Cham to make the first check. I take temps and pulses, and in most cases it's flu. I've learned to recognize that all right, and Wilma has told me what to do—what medicine to give and what to tell the mothers about caring for the sick.

Of course Wilma stops by to see the patients too when she finds the time.

One time it wasn't flu, though, and all of us had a bad time of it. One of Wilma's postpartums developed broncho-pneumonia and we didn't get word until the second day after she was taken sick. Janie Williams' baby was only a week old and I'd been to her house twice to see her—make her comfortable and wash the baby. They were doing wonderfully when Tom, her husband, came to tell us that "Janie was real bad off." Wilma sent me to make a first check. The house is up the right fork of Grassy Branch across the river and it took me over an hour to get there on Cham. As soon as I got there I knew this wasn't any ordinary case of flu. Janie breathed so heavily and with such a funny sound. I took her temperature and it was sky high and her pulse and respiration were high too. Poor Janie was delirious and didn't know me or Tom either. She was in one of the two big beds in the room with the baby in a wooden box cradle beside her. I put the baby on the other bed the first thing, the farthest I could get him away, as there was only one room. Then I sent Tom posthaste for Wilma. By the time she got there Janie's temperature was even higher and Wilma knew that she had pneumonia. She made Tom drive in to Hyden with word for the doctor to come as soon as possible. We did what we could until he came; gave sulfa and so forth, but she didn't get any better. It was midnight before the doctor arrived, and he said it was broncho-pneumonia. All the rest of that night Wilma

and I stayed with Janie, giving some type of sulfa every four hours and injections of something Wilma called digifoline every six hours. It was a fight, but by morning her temperature had gone down to 99 and she was rational again. I was never so glad to have anyone look at me and show that she knew who I was, after those long hours of delirium. Wilma, Eleanor and I took turns staying with her for the next two days and then she was strong enough to be moved in to the hospital. She went by stretcher and logging truck to Dry Hill where the hospital station wagon with its cot bed met her and took her the rest of the way. It's just typical of the F.N.S. to go to so much trouble with a patient; there's nothing they won't do for their patients when they need help.

Lexie paused once again and remembered how she had felt during those long hours of vigil in the lonely mountain cabin. On the second day she had been left in charge of Janie; the memory of the sick woman, the tiny baby in its homemade cradle, and the worried husband who could do nothing but wait helplessly in the background returned vividly to her thoughts. The baby had been in Lexie's charge also; she had made its formula, fed and bathed it with meticulous care. Every direction for the care of the mother and child Lexie had followed with almost fanatic attention. Fortunately a neighbor woman had undertaken to feed the family, but it had been up to Lexie to see that Janie took some nourishment.

By the end of the day, when Wilma came to relieve her,

Lexie did not know whether to be thankful or not. She had been too busy to feel tired, and the knowledge that Janie, the baby, and to a certain extent Tom depended so much on her had done something to give her new confidence in herself. But at the same time she had felt very humble as she rode home in the dusk to Confluence. Lexie knew how slight was her knowledge of nursing; if anything out of the ordinary had happened during the day she would have been at a loss. She wondered, as she paused in her writing, whether she should admit this self-knowledge to Mark. Perhaps not. Maybe it was best to say nothing.

Lexie glanced at her watch. Almost midnight; she had better get on with her letter, if she wanted a good night's sleep.

"I'm dead with sleep but, if I don't finish this now, I may never get at it again. So here goes! When I'm not out making calls I spend practically all of my time fussing with the horses. We have four here now and it's a job to keep them groomed and their tack polished up. Wilma's horse, Merry, developed a swelling on his hock that had me scared for a while. Luckily I remembered that one of the Wendover horses had had a swelling that looked very much like it and I knew what Liz had done for him. Couldn't get word to her to ask what to do, so I went ahead with the same treatment, just praying the whole time. I got an old flannel petticoat out of the collection of second-hand clothing we have here for our sales and cut it up into strips for a bandage. Then with Epsom salts I made a hot

poultice, using cotton pads, and wrapped the poor leg up. It didn't look anything like one of Liz's bandages, but it stayed on at least. It was lucky I had the morning free so I could look after him. When I wasn't fussing with the poultice, I was cleaning tack and picking burrs out of Cham's tail. His winter coat is almost all shed now and I can get the most wonderful polish on him when I brush him. He's such a marvelous shiny black and positively glitters when he's all groomed. But he never stays slicked up for long—the mud around here is terrific and Cham loves it. I'm sure he picks the deepest mudholes to walk through.

I even cleaned the chicken house between bouts with the poultice, and I must say chickens are a messy breed. But once I'd put clean hay in the nests and had the floor scraped off, it looked a different place. You see that there's never time just to sit around here. In our "free time" there's always some little job that needs doing and you just go ahead and do it, because somebody has to.

The swelling had gone down a little in the afternoon—or so it looked to me—so I went on a couple of errands for Wilma. Rode Cham up Trace Branch across the river to take a pair of "old-age glasses" to the dearest old lady you can imagine. Her name is Granny Bingham and she lives all alone in the neatest little house I ever saw. Her son and his enormous family live right near by, so she can "holler" to them if she needs help for anything. It almost seems as though her whole yard and house had been scrubbed by hand.

Even her pig and the half dozen chickens look as though they wouldn't dare get dirty. It's funny how some of the houses have a "don't care" look while others are just spandy. Granny Bingham's is one of the latter all right, and she's as neat as the house. She's a tiny little woman who dresses in white always and she has beautiful old-fashioned manners. She'd sent word to Wilma she needed "old-age glasses" to thread her needle with, so I took out several magnifying glasses for her to try on. We had such fun finding a pair she could see with. Finally she "allowed as how she could git the thread in the needle and jerk a knot in its tail." She thanked me for them and said she was "sure pleased" to have them. I love going to see her; it gives me a lift somehow.

On the way home I was stopped all along the way by people who wanted Wilma to know about some new ache or pain in the family. Some wanted medicine and I guess others just wanted to talk to someone, because they seemed quite cheered up just to air their troubles. I took all the names, of course, so I could tell Wilma. Probably more flu, but I hope not. The epidemic seems to be dying out, thank heaven. Very few new cases. Timmy is miles better and will be on the job in a few days. Until she is, I'll stay here. I'm so glad to have had this chance to be at Confluence. It's so wonderful here; just like home somehow. You feel so far away from so-called civilization, yet we have everything we want. There are mountains all around; everything beginning to bloom now. The dogwood is

past description—seas of it and lots just under my window.

I'm writing up in my room and it's after midnight. I ought to get to bed. I had to dress Merry's leg after supper. I heated up a jar of ichthyol and fixed him all up with a dry bandage for the night. The swelling is much better. Now I guess I'll hire out as a vet, too. What a lot of jobs I can have when I get home! I hate to leave and yet— Three more weeks. Can hear Wilma and Eleanor talking downstairs. They're too tired to climb up here and go to bed. Wilma had two babies today.

With love,

Lexie

P.S. Just heard Wilma tell Eleanor she thought I'd done a "good job" since I've been here. How's that!

Wilma's commendation was sufficient to make Lexie feel that life at Confluence left little to be desired. Even with Eleanor there, Lexie found her days too full to let her presence worry her. The following morning Wilma and Eleanor rode off immediately after breakfast, leaving Lexie to watch over Merry, clean tack, and take any messages that might come to the center. Timmy was well enough to sit up now and was established in the living room with a book before a blazing coal fire.

"How's Merry?" asked Timmy, as Lexie pulled on a heavy pair of rubber boots preparatory to a trip to the stable.

"Full of beans," replied Lexie. "The swelling's really

all gone, but Wilma decided to ride Cham this morning. Merry needs a couple of days' rest." She could not keep the satisfaction from her voice. Her doctoring of Merry's leg had proved successful and she knew that it had been her doing.

She was a little disappointed when Timmy only nodded and went back to her book. Nevertheless she was whistling as she crossed the yard to the stable. The two dogs followed at her heels, scattering the chickens from about the doorway and forcing one of the roosters to a defiant fit of crowing from a safe position in the stable loft.

"Hello, you old boaster," cried Lexie. She tossed a corn-cob at the rooster and laughed as he looked down at her without deigning to move.

After grooming Merry and the fourth horse, Lexie took a pair of saddles out to the stone wall beside the stable so that she could sit in the sun as she cleaned them. The dogs lay down at her feet, the Jersey cow wandered on the hillside above her, and the chickens clucked and argued in the mud of the stableyard. It was a peaceful, quiet time and Lexie worked on, whistling softly to herself as she rubbed at the saddles.

Just before noon she heard the soft click of the pullgate and glanced up to see a small, tow-headed boy standing just inside the yard. He evidently did not dare to come any farther and stood there uncertainly, staring at the house in an agony of embarrassment. Lexie had never seen the child before, but she guessed that he had come with a message for Wilma.

"May I help you?" she called.

The boy jumped as though he had been stung by a bee and immediately put his finger in his mouth. He stared at Lexie, obviously unable to utter a word.

Lexie went toward him, walking slowly so as not to frighten him. She smiled as she reached his side and waited until he could find words to deliver his message. Suddenly he reached in his pocket, took out a tiny scrap of soiled paper and thrust it toward her. Then without waiting another moment, he turned on his heels and raced out the gate and along the road.

Lexie chuckled as she looked after him. Opening the note, she read the tipsy penciled lettering with a frown of bewilderment.

"Annie is tuk bad. She is franze and fevers and her yars. is acen. She is lik to died. Ples cum."

There was no signature, and for a long time Lexie could not puzzle out the note's message. At last she translated it to mean that Annie was "took bad," that she was "frenzied and fevered with an earache." There was no doubt that the writer of the note wanted Wilma to come to see the sufferer. Lexie put the note in her pocket to give it to Wilma at lunch. No doubt she would know who Annie was and where to find her.

"It's little Annie Prescott, I'm sure," said Wilma, when she saw the note at lunch. "Probably flu." Her dark eyes lost their merry liveliness for a moment. "I hoped we wouldn't get a new case. Lexie, you ride Cham up there after lunch, will you? The Prescotts live up Wilder about two miles. Anyone can tell you where."

Lexie undertook the mission as soon as lunch was over

and had no difficulty in finding the Prescott house. As Wilma had suspected, the little girl had flu, and Lexie followed her usual procedure in prescribing treatment for her. With a promise that Wilma would come to see her the next day, Lexie rode away, wishing she had an excuse to take a longer ride. It was a beautiful day and even Cham seemed to feel the charm of the sun and soft wind. But she had promised Wilma to report back at once and she turned toward the center obediently.

She passed the Corey's house halfway home and pulled Cham to a walk, hoping to catch a glimpse of Mrs. Corey. Her wish was gratified as soon as she reached the gate. Mrs. Corey ran out the door and called to Lexie, obviously too much upset about something to remember that her husband had forbidden her to "have any truck" with the nurses.

"Hit's Robby," she cried, wringing her hands. "He's git off since morning. My man he's off somewhere's and I can't send him. Can you kindly look out to find him?"

Guessing that Robby was her little boy, Lexie quickly assured the worried woman that she would do her best to find the child. "I'll ask along the way," she said. "Don't you worry; he'll come home. He's probably playing somewhere."

Mrs. Corey thanked her and watched Lexie ride away, still rubbing her thin hands together in her distress of mind.

But Lexie discovered no one along the way who had seen the child, and she reached the mouth of Wilder still without any news of him. Just as she turned off on the river

road, she heard a shout from the river bank. She pulled Cham up sharply and rode down toward the water. She saw Robby at once. He was standing on a heap of logs at the riverside, poking at the water with a long pole. Lexie knew that the Middle Fork was deep at this spot, and for a second her heart missed a beat. Robby was balanced so insecurely on the logs; it seemed a miracle that he could lean so far over the swirling water and not fall forward.

“Robby!” Lexie spoke more sharply than she intended. She wanted to attract his attention, yet not startle him. But her voice was loud in the quiet air and Robby whirled about at the sound of it. Lexie caught a glimpse of his frightened face as he slipped and plunged into the swift-moving water of the Middle Fork. She heard him scream before he was swept out into the current.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FOR one dreadful moment Lexie sat perfectly still on Cham's back, too paralyzed with horror to be able to move. She could see Robby's head bobbing on the surface of the water, but the current was carrying him out toward the middle of the river with terrifying speed. He made no sound, but his little white face with its round frightened eyes was indelibly photographed in her mind.

Then Lexie acted, instinctively and without thought of the consequences. She could swim, but she was not a strong swimmer, and she had no idea whether or not she could fight the swirling water. She rode Cham down the river a little distance, then, tossing his reins over the branch of a tree, she slid from his back and ran down to the water's edge. She remembered, just before she stepped into the river, that her heavy boots and coat would impede her. Another precious moment was lost as she tore them off. Never once had she taken her eyes from that dark bobbing spot on the water that was Robby's head. He was still afloat, and Lexie could see that he was making convulsive efforts

to swim. But the current was too much for him and carried him along relentlessly.

At last Lexie was ready; she stood up, took a long breath, and plunged. The water was surprisingly cold, considering the warmth of the day, and Lexie gasped as she surfaced from her dive. For a second she could not see Robby's head now that it was on a level with her own; then she caught a glimpse of him, still moving away from her in the grip of the current. She had time to notice as she struck out toward him that his arms were not moving as frantically as they had been a moment before. He must be tiring; perhaps he would sink.

Lexie headed straight for the middle of the river where the current was strongest, so that she might take advantage of it. At first she swam with furious effort, flailing her arms and legs in an attempt to make speed. Then, as her breath began coming in gasps, she realized that she must conserve her strength and swim more evenly. She forced herself to remember all that she knew of the science of swimming and soon settled down to an overhead stroke that carried her along at a far better rate. Robby's head came nearer; she could see his face now. He must have seen or heard her, for he was looking back at her, his face a mask of terror. He had given up any endeavor to swim now, letting the river carry him where it would.

Lexie risked a shout of encouragement and swallowed a mouthful of muddy river water. For a moment, as she coughed and choked, she wondered if she had the strength to go on. Robby was still some distance ahead of her, and already her arms felt like bars of lead and her legs useless

weights. The sweater she wore dragged at her, a dead and cumbersome load. Then Robby's head disappeared. The spot where he had been was nothing but a smooth expanse of unruffled water. Lexie knew then that she had to go on, that she must reach him when he came to the surface again.

Now Lexie swam without thought or consciousness of the ache in her arms and legs or the burning agony in her throat and lungs. Each breath was a sobbing torture, but she could not think of that now. She could not think of anything but reaching that place on the river where Robby had disappeared. Her arms and legs moved automatically; they carried her forward, more slowly now, but with a steady surety. The churned, mud-laden water was in her eyes, her nose, her mouth, blinding and choking her, but Lexie kept on.

Robby came to the surface after what seemed to be hours, though Lexie knew it could only have been a minute at most. To her vast relief he was just ahead of her now, turning and twisting as helplessly as a cork in the water. A few more strokes would bring her to him and Lexie made them with her last ounce of strength. One hand reached out and caught at his arm but immediately, she felt it slip from her fingers. She clutched at him again just as his head sank beneath the water and she held on with the force of desperation.

Then, as by a miracle, Lexie got her second wind. A moment before she had been at the ragged end of her rope, then with her next breath she was breathing more freely and some measure of strength came back to her arms. She hauled Robby to the surface and held him tightly against

her with one arm. Fortunately he was too exhausted to fight her. Lexie had a glimpse of the ashy face against her shoulder, before she struck out toward the shore. He must have lost consciousness, she thought. Suppose she had been too late and that he was dead already? But Lexie had no time to think of anything but getting to the shore; that must be her first and only endeavor now.

Burdened with Robby's dead weight and swimming with only one arm, Lexie fought to get out of the current and into the quieter water near the bank. She knew they were being carried along in the moving water and that for every foot she gained in a shoreward direction, she was losing three to the current. The bank seemed to move past her like a scene from a moving train. For a moment Lexie wondered if it wouldn't be easier just to let herself drift with the current, to abandon any attempt to reach shore. Perhaps it was hopeless to try to swim any farther. A sort of dreamy lassitude lulled her brain; her arms and legs were quite numb. She felt no sensation of any kind, except a soothing murmur in her ears. It must be the running water of the river.

Then Lexie's head crashed against something hard and shocked her into an awareness of her danger. She reached out to ward off another such blow and her fingers closed around the thick branch of a tree. Lexie was wide awake now and she saw that she had floated against an enormous tree that had fallen over into the river. Its topmost branches reached almost to the center of the stream and its roots still clung to the bank. For a second Lexie scarcely realized her good fortune. Her head ached from the crack

against the branch and she was confused at finding herself still in the water, yet partially entangled with this denizen of the land. Then she knew that she was safe, that some heaven-sent chance had swept her against this tree. In the nick of time, just as her weariness was overcoming her will to fight, the tree had stretched out its arms to save her and Robby, too. Lexie clung to that life-giving branch as though it were the one steady thing in a world of chaos.

For several minutes she stayed there, holding Robby tightly against her shoulder and drawing deep breaths to regain her strength. Then, slowly and cautiously, she began edging her way along the branch, using it as a support. She went from one branch to the next, only swimming when necessary to reach another arm of the tree. In a surprisingly short time her feet touched the muddy bottom of the river. Then she hoisted Robby higher on her shoulder and waded through the clinging mud to the steep bank. She was almost sobbing with relief when she reached out to grasp at the long grass that hung down over the water's edge.

It was a temptation to hang on there for a time, to let the knowledge that she had reached this longed-for haven sink into her consciousness. But she knew that she must get Robby home as quickly as possible; he was still unconscious and his pale face, almost blue with the cold of the water, frightened her. He ought to be tucked into a warm bed instantly. She got a firmer hold on the grass and crawled on hands and knees up the bank, half-dragging the child with her. He had become a leaden weight now and her own wet clothes were an added burden. She was

conscious of the sweet smell of the new grass, of the good earthy scent of the ground. Nothing she had ever known before gave her quite such a sense of gratitude as that homely, everyday smell.

When she reached the top of the bank she placed Robby flat on the ground and rolled him over on his stomach. She knew she must try to revive him before taking him home; he must be full of water and it would be dangerous to carry him so far while he was still unconscious. Her Nurses' Aide training had given her instruction in artificial respiration, and Lexie knelt beside the child with her hands placed firmly under his ribs. With a sure, even motion she pressed down with both hands, released her hold, and repeated the pressure. She did this several times before she saw Robby's eyelids flutter. Then a gush of water from his mouth and nose told her that her tactics were successful. He coughed violently and opened his eyes wide.

Lexie sat back on her heels. "All right?" she asked. The commonplace question was a poor reflection of the vast relief that flooded over her.

Robby lifted his head and looked at her. His eyes were clouded, but he seemed to recognize her and to accept her presence without his usual shyness. He nodded, but made no attempt to get up. Lexie knew that he was probably too weak to walk and her spirit quailed within her. She glanced along the river bank. The current had carried them some distance from the place where she had left Cham and she knew it would take her at least five minutes to get back to him. She would have to carry Robby; in the

child's weakened condition, there was no alternative. It was only when she lifted him in her arms that Lexie realized quite how tired she was. Her arms seemed almost useless and her legs moved only because she willed them to do so. She half staggered as she walked, but she kept on.

Once a sense of near hysteria overcame her as she pictured how she must look. She was smeared with mud from head to foot, her hair hung down over her face in a sodden mass, and her clothes clung to her, a wet and soggy mess of river water. The thought of what her Boston friends would say if they could see her now was beyond her imagination. They would never recognize this ghastly apparition for the Lexie Littleton who was always so careful of her appearance, so fussy about her clothes.

A faint whinny reached her ears when she had been walking for almost five minutes and Lexie looked up to see Cham waiting for her. He knew her at least and was sending her a welcome. Lexie almost ran the last few yards to the place where she had tied him. She threw her free arm about his neck and hugged him.

"You didn't try to get away! You waited!" she whispered. Two tears made a path through the mud on her cheeks. They were tears of relief and joy, for now that she and Robby were safe she had time to cry.

But she remembered Robby and the necessity of getting him home; there was no time for tears until she had him warm and dry in bed. She forced her feet into her boots and wrapped Robby in her jacket.

"It's all right, Robby," she murmured, lifting him in her arms once more. "We'll be home soon."

She led Cham to a rock so that she might use it as a mounting block and placed Robby on the saddle. Steadying him with one hand she scrambled up behind him. Once in the saddle, she urged Cham forward, digging her heels into his sides to make him understand the necessity for speed. Cham obeyed with a will and settled into his smooth running walk as soon as he reached the Wilder Creek trail. Lexie had scarcely any power or need to guide him; Cham seemed to know where they were going and it was only the support of the stirrups that kept Lexie in the saddle. She held Robby against her with one hand and with the other clutched at the pommel. Together they helped keep her upright.

Mrs. Corey was at her gate when they rounded the bend in the path. Even at a distance Lexie could see the look of amazement in her face when she first caught sight of Cham and his strange load. The look gave way almost at once to one of mingled distress and relief. She recognized her child and seemed to know where Lexie had found him. She ran forward, moving clumsily, her arms outstretched.

"Hit's Robby!" she called. "Hit's him!"

Lexie could only nod. She slid off Cham's back and placed Robby in his mother's arms. "Here he is," she said simply.

Mrs. Corey clutched at the sodden child with an odd little sound of joy. "He war in the river?" It was more of a statement than a question.

But Lexie did not bother to explain what had happened. "We must get him into dry clothes and into bed," she said hurriedly. "He's been unconscious, but he's all

right now. I'm afraid he'll have a chill if we don't hurry."

Mrs. Corey hesitated, but only for a second. "Will you kindly step in?" she said formally. "My man is to home. He will be uncommon grateful."

Lexie scarcely heard her. She hurried Mrs. Corey up the path to the house. Once inside the bare little room, she was conscious for the first time that Mrs. Corey had warned her that her husband was at home. In that confined space his tall and rigid figure seemed to fill the room. He was standing before the fireplace and, as his wife came toward him with Robby in her arms, Lexie saw the expression of amazed disbelief in his eyes.

"Hit's Robby," said Mrs. Corey unnecessarily. "He war in the river and *she* hauled him to land." Mrs. Corey nodded toward Lexie, then looked at her husband as though begging him to understand what had happened and what Lexie had done for them.

But Mr. Corey was not yet prepared to acknowledge either Lexie's presence in the house or what she had done for Robby. He bent forward to look into the child's face and Lexie realized for the first time that the man was capable of feeling. His face seemed to lose some of its grim hardness and his eyes rested on the child as though the little white face were all the world to him.

"Hit war God's grace," he said, as he straightened up. His voice was as harsh as ever, but there was something in its tone that showed his emotion. "Rachel, git him beneath the kivers." Mr. Corey gestured peremptorily toward the wide double bed that very nearly filled one half of the room.

Lexie helped Mrs. Corey pull off Robby's wet clothing and rub him down with a piece of sacking that did duty as a towel. The child was fully conscious now, though he made no attempt to speak. He sat on his mother's lap with his head against her shoulder and his enormous blue eyes watching Lexie. He seemed to know what she had done for him, but had no way of expressing his gratitude save by looking at her with a sort of awed astonishment. When the worst of the mud had been wiped from his hands and face, he was tucked into the big bed beneath a mountain of quilts. Almost before the last cover had been placed over him he was sound asleep.

Both Lexie and Mrs. Corey had worked in complete silence. The looming presence by the fireplace seemed to forbid talk. It was as though they were waiting for him to pronounce judgment on what had taken place, to give Lexie's action the seal of his approval. The moment Robby was safely in bed, Lexie realized once again that she was desperately weary and that she must drag herself back to the center somehow.

"I must get back," she murmured. She turned to the door and stumbled over the rough flooring. "I—I guess I'm a sight," she added, trying to laugh.

Mrs. Corey came forward and touched her arm. Looking into her care-lined face, Lexie saw in her eyes all the gratitude that she wanted to express. "I give you thanks," said Mrs. Corey simply.

Lexie reached out and impulsively squeezed the woman's hand. There was nothing she could say in response to such feeling; an odd sense of embarrassment

held her tongue-tied for a moment. Then she said hurriedly, "When Robby wakes up, it would be a good idea to have some hot soup for him. If he seems feverish, you had better let the nurse know." She almost whispered the last words and glanced nervously at Mr. Corey.

But Mr. Corey was looking toward the bed and did not appear to hear. Mrs. Corey nodded to show that she understood Lexie's advice and once again seemed to be trying to tell her of her gratitude.

Lexie went on out the door, anxious to avoid another display of feeling from Mrs. Corey and longing to get back to the center. Cham was tied to the fence rail and Lexie went toward him, wishing that some magic power would transport both of them to Confluence in the space of a single moment. It was almost five o'clock and the sun was already resting on the top of the highest hills in the west. In a few minutes it would be dusk and Lexie knew that the evening chill would penetrate the very marrow of her bones. She was wet through and sticky with mud and water. If she did not catch a worse cold than Robby might, she would be lucky.

She untied Cham and led him to a large rock beside the fence which would serve as a mounting block. Suddenly, as she stood on the rock, she wondered if she could ever climb into the saddle. A sort of weary lassitude made the slightest effort a near impossibility. She lifted her foot toward the stirrup and the next thing she knew she was sitting down on the rock, feeling that she had been dropped there from a great height. It was almost the last

straw and Lexie felt a sob gathering in her throat. She was so tired, so horribly tired. If only— Then Lexie felt herself lifted in the air by a pair of invisible hands that held her at her waist. She was in the saddle and looking down into Mr. Corey's face as he stood by Cham's side almost before she knew what had happened.

Lexie stared down at him, too astonished to find words to thank him for his help. Mr. Corey looked as stern and uncompromising as ever, there was nothing in his face to show that he had experienced any change of feeling toward her. Then, as Lexie managed to nod at him to express her thanks, he said in a loud, commanding voice, "For what ye done, I thank ye kindly." He bent his head in a sort of formal bow, then straightened up once more and looked at her with an almost challenging glare.

Lexie understood what his words cost him and she was more confused than she had been by Mrs. Corey's gratitude. She heard herself muttering a few words of what she felt must be utterly foolish remonstrance and shook Cham's reins to make him go on. Her strongest wish at the moment was to get away; she could not stand another word of thanks from the Coreys.

Cham was only too glad to start for home and set out at a brisk pace. Lexie clung to the reins and jammed her feet into the broad stirrups. They would have to hold her in the saddle for it took her last ounce of strength just to remain upright. As she rounded the bend in the trail, she risked a look behind her. Mr. Corey still stood by the rock, staring after her. But he made no gesture of farewell and in

another moment the intervening trees hid him from sight. An impression of the huge, stern figure remained in Lexie's memory for a long time.

Lexie never had a clear recollection of the ride home to Confluence. She gave Cham his head and let him take her there of his own free will. She was vaguely conscious of passing the familiar landmarks along the trail, of the evening chill that settled over her as the sun sank out of sight, and of telling herself over and over again that she must stay in the saddle and keep a firm grip on the reins.

The lights of the nursing center when they showed through the trees were like the welcoming glow from a long unseen home. She rode toward them, the thought of the fire in the living room lending her renewed strength. The stableyard was deserted except for the Jersey cow, who looked at her with a stare of bovine wonder. Then as Lexie slid to the ground she heard a gasp from the direction of the stable door. She saw Wilma standing there, and just behind her was Eleanor. Both girls looked at her as though they had never seen her before.

"*Lexie!*" The cry burst from both the nurses in a concerted shout of amazement.

Lexie could only shake her head. Suddenly the thought of explaining what had happened, of trying to tell the story of her adventure was more than she could face. "I—I—" she began and gestured helplessly. For a dreadful moment she was sure she was about to cry from sheer weariness.

But neither Wilma nor Eleanor was the sort of person

who let the sight of a mud-bedraggled, sodden courier overcome her ability to take action. In a matter of seconds Eleanor had taken Cham's reins from Lexie's hands and was leading him to the stable. Wilma had Lexie's arm in a firm grip and was propelling her toward the house.

"Don't try to explain," said Wilma, as Lexie murmured some few words of her story. "The tank's full of hot water. You go and soak in the tub." Her voice was more gentle than usual and there was a softened light in her eyes.

"The river," muttered Lexie. "I—"

"It couldn't be anything but the river," replied Wilma. She spoke firmly and Lexie understood that Wilma needed no explanations now.

Ten minutes later she was in the tub. It took two scrubbing with soap and as many rinses to wash the mud from her hair. By the time she was dry and wrapped in an ancient woolen bathrobe belonging to Wilma, Lexie felt almost human once more. She knew she was ravenously hungry and longed for her dinner, yet somehow she dreaded the meal. She knew that she must say something to explain her bedraggled appearance to the other girls, but it was hard to know just what to tell them without seeming to boast. Eleanor might think she was indulging in mock heroics if she gave a detailed account of those horrible minutes in the river, and yet what could she say that would lessen the real drama of the occasion? Lexie sighed. She did not feel at all like a heroine; she only felt hungry and dreadfully sleepy.

The expectant faces of the three nurses that greeted Lexie when they sat down to dinner told her that she must

say something to ward off the questions that were bound to come.

"That little Corey boy," she said casually, as she took her place. "The little monkey. He was playing beside the river and fell in. Luckily I was going by just at that second and saw him. I fished him out and got him home, but I certainly got a mud bath out of it. I always knew the Middle Fork was muddy, but it's worse than anything you can imagine once you get right in it." She laughed as she finished and looked straight into the three pairs of eyes that were watching her. Somehow something in her look must have told them that Lexie had said all she wanted to about the incident, that she had given her explanation and did not want to discuss it any further.

The other three, by a tacit agreement, took her wish at its full value and said very little more. They joked about it for a few minutes, taking their cue from Lexie's light account, then let the subject drop. Lexie was almost tearfully grateful to them. She was beginning to feel that even her hunger could not keep her awake much longer. By the time dessert arrived, she was nodding over her plate like a loosely jointed doll.

"Lexie!" It was Wilma who spoke, and her high voice held a note of command. "You go to bed!"

"Yes, I—I guess I will," said Lexie meekly. "I'll be fine in the morning, but I'm so sleepy I just can't—" She did not try to finish, but stumbled toward the stairs. Five minutes later she was in bed and her last conscious thought was that she had not told all that had happened. No one could say that she had tried to make anything of her ad-

venture; she had not boasted about it. She had made light of it, and somehow Lexie knew that she had done the right thing.

The next morning Lexie felt quite herself once more. She had no trace of a cold, her night's sleep had proved an effective cure for her weariness. But when she looked at her watch, Lexie gave a gasp of dismay. It was almost nine o'clock. Wilma had let her sleep the clock around. There were a thousand things she ought to do today and already she had slept a good two hours beyond her usual rising time. Lexie hurried into the blue jeans and shirt that were her daily costume and ran down the stairs. Wilma and Eleanor would be out on rounds and even Timmy had planned to start work again that day. Except for the young girl who acted as a maid, Lexie expected to find the house deserted.

"Hello, have a good night's sleep?" It was Eleanor's level voice, and Lexie stopped short on the stairs.

She saw Eleanor standing before the fireplace with a long-handled toasting fork in one hand. Eleanor's face was as expressionless as ever and her eyes as calm as they looked toward Lexie. There was something in her almost statuesque immobility of feature that always faintly annoyed Lexie. She seemed so sure of herself, so completely in command of her emotions, that in Lexie's opinion she was very nearly inhuman.

Lexie recovered from her surprise and tried to look as though she were glad to see Eleanor. She gestured toward the toasting fork in her hand. "Haven't you had breakfast?" she asked. She knew she sounded nervous. Never in

all the time she and Eleanor had been at Wendover or Confluence had they been alone together for any length of time. Lexie knew she had avoided any sort of tête à tête with Eleanor and wondered if the feeling had been mutual.

"Long ago," said Eleanor. "I heard you moving around upstairs and though I'd start some toast for you. The maid had a night off to spend with her family."

Lexie remembered suddenly that it was clinic day and that Eleanor was probably to take care of the visiting patients. It would account for her presence at the center now.

"Th-thanks for making the toast," said Lexie hurriedly. She wished she could control her nervousness. "Please don't bother with me. I'll have to rush. I was planning to clean the feed room this morning and I'm late." She felt that she was babbling inanities but that she must keep the conversation on an impersonal plane.

Eleanor finished the toast and placed it on the table, moving with her usual unhurried calm. Then, to Lexie's dismay, she sat down at the end of the table as though prepared for a cozy chat.

"Ted Fenton stopped by this morning on his way to the sawmill," she said slowly. "He told us what you did for the Corey child. It seems that the news is all over the district. You are something of a heroine at Confluence." She spoke matter-of-factly, but Lexie caught an odd note in her voice that might be either admiration or even envy.

Lexie's lips tightened. She was vaguely annoyed that the story was out, but pleased that it had been spread by

others rather than herself. "He probably made a mountain out of it," she said, trying to speak lightly. "It wasn't anything really. I just got a good mud bath, that's all. I wonder how little Robby is. I hope he didn't catch cold."

"Evidently he's none the worse for it, according to Ted," replied Eleanor. She was silent for a long moment, then Lexie heard her murmur, as though speaking to herself, "I can't swim. I couldn't have helped him." It was almost as if the words were dragged from her. Lexie did not have to look at her to know that Eleanor hated the idea of acknowledging herself incapable of any form of action. It did not need a deep insight into Eleanor's character to realize that she prided herself on her efficiency and ability to cope with any sort of situation. Lexie suspected also that the realization that Lexie Littleton could do something that she couldn't must be a bitter pill for her to swallow.

There did not seem to be anything for Lexie to say in response to Eleanor's self-imposed confession, so she remained silent. An uneasy embarrassment made her face feel hot and she wished Eleanor would leave the table.

Then, to Lexie's utter distress, Eleanor mentioned the one name that she had hoped might never again be spoken between them. "You are very fond of Mark, aren't you?" It was more of a statement than a question and Lexie had no wish to refute it.

She nodded, her face flaming. "We are engaged." Lexie made the announcement almost involuntarily, as though it were a challenge, a gage thrown at her rival's feet. The moment she had said it, she wished she hadn't. How

could she be sure she was still engaged to Mark? He had not mentioned the fact in recent months. For all she knew he might be engaged to Eleanor Payne. Sometimes she was sure he was. Lexie stared at Eleanor, but there was nothing in the latter's face to show that she had even heard Lexie's statement.

Eleanor was holding a spoon in her fingers and kept her eyes fixed upon it. Then she began to talk slowly and deliberately, as though compelled to speak.

"He's a fine person," Lexie heard her say. "I know he has a future in the profession."

Lexie said nothing. There did not seem to be any adequate reply to a statement that was so obviously true in her own opinion.

"He needs the right person to help him." Eleanor looked straight at Lexie with an almost challenging glare.

Before Lexie could open her lips to reply, Eleanor went on, "I'm very fond of the Service. It's the sort of work I like. I'm looking forward to the midwifery course. It starts next week."

Lexie, who had not been given time to consider the significance of Eleanor's references to Mark and his career, seized on this last remark. "I know," she said hurriedly. "I'll probably be back at Wendover by then. Timmy is well now, so they won't need us here." The Service was a safe topic and she rushed on, "Confluence is my favorite of the centers and I'm so glad I was sent here. Mercy, it's almost nine-thirty. I'll never get through, and I know Wilma will want me to go somewhere this afternoon.

Thanks for making the toast. I must rush." And Lexie escaped from the room without further ceremony. As she went out the door she glanced back and saw Eleanor looking after her. There was an expression in her eyes that Lexie could not understand. It was the same look of either admiration or envy which she had seen in Eleanor's eyes a short time previously.

"Whew!" Lexie waited until she was in the yard before she relieved her feelings with this expressive sound. "Now why did she talk about Mark like that? What did she mean?"

There were only the chickens and the cow to answer her, and they were plainly uninterested in the whole question. As she swept out the feed room Lexie tried to remember all that Eleanor had said. It was plain that she had been trying to tell her something about Mark, but what she had said had been so meaningless in implication that Lexie could not fathom what lay behind it. She had said that Mark had a future and that he needed the "right person" to help him. Lexie frowned at the recollection. There was no doubt in Lexie's mind that Eleanor did not believe that Lexie Littleton was that person. Eleanor must have wanted to say something else and had not found the courage to do so. What was it that she was keeping from her? Did she have some special knowledge of Mark that she, Lexie, knew nothing of? Lexie sighed heavily. It was worrying to feel that there was something behind that conversation with Eleanor that eluded her. She ought to be able to puzzle those few sentences out, but the more

Lexie thought of them the more confused and vague they became in her mind. The only thing clear to her was that Eleanor had been talking about Mark.

"I don't think I'll write him about Robby," she told the cow, who was chewing her cud by the stable door.

The Jersey swallowed and in doing so seemed to nod her head in agreement. Lexie laughed. "I'm glad you agree. It might sound boasting, and it would be hard to tell it without describing all I went through. I'll wait until I see him."

After lunch Wilma gave Lexie a list of people whom she wished her to call upon that afternoon. "Mostly check-ups," said Wilma. "Are you sure you feel all right? We can't have you getting flu, you know."

Lexie smiled. "Never felt better," she declared.

Wilma nodded briskly. "You'll find that everyone has heard about the Corey child. They'll all want to hear the story, so be prepared." Wilma spoke as though warning Lexie of an ordeal.

Lexie's ride up Wilder Branch that afternoon very nearly proved to be what Wilma had prophesied. Even people she met on the trail stopped her and wanted to know more about the incident. Some of them had heard an utterly garbled story in which Lexie figured in the role of a latter-day Baron Münchhausen, performing feats of valor that were fantastic. Lexie settled on a simple account of her adventure, a tale that was plainly disappointing to many of her hearers. In the houses she visited she was forced to be more explicit, for her audience, in a sense, had her cornered. By the end of the afternoon Lexie was

heartily tired of the whole affair and wished with all her heart that it had never taken place.

On her way back to the center Lexie passed the Corey's house. It was five o'clock, just the hour she had left there the night before, and Lexie remembered how tired she had been then. She ought to go in and see how Robby was, but she hesitated, dreading a further expression of gratitude from the father and mother. There were no lights in the shabby little house, but the smoke from the chimney indicated that someone must be home. It was really her duty to ask about Robby, if only for the sake of politeness. Lexie tied Cham to the fence rail and went up the path. She was no longer afraid of Mr. Corey, now that she knew him to be capable of real feeling, but she hoped he was not at home.

"Anybody home?" She knocked on the door jamb, but there was no response. Looking in through the open door, she saw in the darkening room that the fire was burning low. It cast a dull glow on the scattered pieces of furniture, the rickety table, the newspapered walls, and the huge bed. But there was no sign of a human being. Probably, Lexie decided, they were all out. If so, Robby must be all right.

She turned away, but before she had taken a step off the porch she heard a sound that brought her up short. It was a stifled moan, a muffled cry that sent a stab of fear to Lexie's brain. It came from somewhere within that dimly lit room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

LEXIE stood where she was, a weakening sense of dread holding her to the spot. The room beyond the open door seemed almost eerie in the half-light; great shadows lurched on the walls, thrown there by the flickering fire-light. Sometimes they appeared to assume the shapes of human figures or of animals from a world of fantasy. With all her heart and reason Lexie wanted to run from the house, to escape from a repetition of that cry.

It came again almost immediately, and suddenly Lexie knew who had made the sound. It was Mrs. Corey; Lexie caught the familiar tone of her thin, plaintive voice even in that muffled sound of misery. Lexie knew, too, what her moans foretold. Her child was ready to be born.

Knowing who had cried out took away any feeling of ghostliness that the room had held for her before. Lexie crossed the threshold almost without realizing that she had moved.

"Mrs. Corey! Mrs. Corey, where are you?" She looked frantically about in the dim light, but saw no one. Then, as she went toward the lamp that stood on the center

table, she heard someone move on the floor by the big bed. Lexie was on her knees at Mrs. Corey's side in an instant.

"Mrs. Corey, what is it? What's the matter?" Lexie knew that her questions were as unnecessary as they were foolish even as she asked them. Her first guess had been correct. In her weeks in the mountains Lexie had seen several women in the same condition and realized that, in the mountain idiom, Mrs. Corey's "time" had come.

Mrs. Corey looked up at her with glazed eyes and for a moment did not seem to know her. Then her thin hands reached out and clutched Lexie's arms in a clawlike grip. She seemed to want to hold to her as though Lexie were something real and stable in a sea of uncertainties.

"Hit's come," she gasped. "My time, hit's come." Lexie caught the note of fear in her voice and remembered the day when Mrs. Corey had told her of losing her other babies and her fright at the prospect of bearing this child. She remembered something else, too. Mrs. Corey had said then that she didn't see how she could bear to "stand hit again alone." In that moment Lexie made up her mind that Mrs. Corey would not have to be alone. No matter what happened or what her own fears might be she would stay with Mrs. Corey.

Lexie drew a deep breath and forced herself to speak calmly. "Mrs. Corey, you must get to bed. You can't stay on the floor. Let me help you." She slipped one arm beneath the frail shoulders and lifted her to a sitting position. Then she glanced at the bed and realized that she should make it more comfortable before Mrs. Corey lay

down. The quilts were tossed and tumbled about and, even in the pale light, Lexie could see that it held the usual miscellany of articles that were so often a part of a bed's furnishings in the mountain cabins. She would have to go about the business of making Mrs. Corey comfortable in a more orderly fashion.

"Just stay here a minute," she murmured. She dragged up a chair to serve as a back rest for Mrs. Corey and got to her feet. Mrs. Corey seemed to accept both her presence and her help with her usual resignation. She made no sound, but she watched all that Lexie did with a sort of weary indifference.

Lexie forced herself to think what she must do first, so that she need not waste time or energy in useless motion. The lamp should be lit and Lexie found matches on the table. It cast a warm glow in the cluttered room and, in spite of the poverty and disorder it revealed, Lexie felt that the atmosphere had changed for the better. As she advanced on the bed to strip and clear it, she realized that she had forgotten something that she should have asked the moment she understood Mrs. Corey's condition.

"Where's Mr. Corey?" she demanded. "He must go for the other nurse."

How could she have forgotten even for a moment the necessity of getting Wilma here in the shortest possible space of time? The baby might arrive at any moment, and what could she do to help Mrs. Corey then? Just being with her was not going to be enough by any means.

She got no answer to her question and looked down at Mrs. Corey. She was staring up at Lexie as though her

words were utterly incomprehensible. The same look of nervous dread that Lexie had seen in her eyes so often had returned. A spasm of pain crossed her face, but she did not cry out.

"Where is he?" repeated Lexie, her voice sharper than she intended.

Mrs. Corey gestured vaguely with one hand. Her answer came in the merest whisper. "He's a-huntin' on the hills. Him and Robby, they went off afore noontime."

"Robby too!" Lexie's surprise showed in her voice.

"Robby's right fitten. Seems like *he* can't bear the child out of his sight after his wettin'."

Lexie glanced at her watch. It was very nearly fifty-three now. Mr. Corey would be home soon. Somehow she would make him go for Wilma when he came. Until then, there was nothing for her to do but get Mrs. Corey to bed. She yanked the heaped quilts from the bed and tossed them over a chair. The pieces of sacking that had been sewn together for a sheet were littered with torn scraps of paper, the handle of a broken spoon, a much dented saucepan and, beneath the crumpled pillow, an ancient double-barreled revolver. Evidently the bed had not been remade in some time, and this collection was the result of some days of inattention.

"Have you a clean sheet?" asked Lexie, trying not to show her dismay at the bed's condition. She lifted the revolver gingerly and placed it on the table.

But Mrs. Corey must have sensed Lexie's feeling for she said plaintively, "Seems though I couldn't git strength for nothin' lately. Hit war different back home. Hit war

mighty different." Her voice shook and she sounded close to tears. She recovered herself, however, and pointed to the chest of drawers across the room. "'Pears like I see a sheet thar lately," she murmured.

Lexie found a clean sheet stuffed in with a varied assortment of clothing and began spreading it over the mattress. "Where did you come from?" she asked gently. Any topic of conversation would serve to keep Mrs. Corey's mind off her present trouble.

"Carolina. I was brung up in the hills thar. They's home to me, the long hills down thar." Mrs. Corey's voice trembled, but she went on, "'Twas *his* notion to come hyar. I—" She stopped suddenly and looked quickly in Lexie's direction.

Lexie guessed that Mrs. Corey did not want to seem disloyal to her husband and pretended not to have heard the last sentence. "It must be lovely down there," she said briskly, "but it's nice here, too. I've learned to love these hills."

Mrs. Corey sighed. "Seems though I couldn't take no joy of hit hyar. Thar was flowers at home. I had the yard full of flowers and the house kept right. Hit just don't seem to take hold with me hyar."

Lexie caught the homesickness in her voice and began to understand something of Mrs. Corey's indifference to her present surroundings. It was plain that the dreary little cabin so far from the hills she knew and loved had never seemed like home to her. She could not take an interest in it and had let it slide into its present condition of neglect and disorder. Perhaps, thought Lexie, when

her baby comes, she'll change. She won't be afraid any more and will have time for her house. The thought of the baby recalled the probable nearness of its arrival and Lexie hurried to finish the bed. What if Mr. Corey did not come in time to get Wilma? Suppose he refused to go for her at all? Lexie shut these possibilities out of her mind. One thing at a time, she told herself sternly.

Mrs. Corey's pains had evidently slackened for she was now sitting up straighter and she looked less miserable. "Thar's no call fer me to git to bed," she announced suddenly. "Thar's the meal to git ready afore *he* gits home." She began to get to her feet, moving ponderously and with an obvious effort. Suddenly she clutched her arms about her waist and would have fallen if Lexie had not leaped to support her.

"You lie down," commanded Lexie, making a desperate attempt to speak with the cool authority that Wilma showed in such crises. "Let me help you."

Mrs. Corey was in no mood to protest now and managed to get to the bed with Lexie's help. She looked relieved once she was lying down and even smiled weakly up at Lexie. "I thank ye," she whispered. "I—" Another spasm caught her and she gasped.

Lexie stood by the bed, fighting down a rising sense of panic. What could she do to help? She had nothing to give Mrs. Corey, no medicines or pills of any sort. Even if she had them she had no authority to give them. She was helpless. If only Mr. Corey would come. Even Robby could find his way to the center, if he were at hand to send. But there was no one. She was alone in the lonely cabin with a

woman whose child was very obviously due to arrive at any moment.

Lexie knew the value of keeping busy, of occupying herself with anything that would keep her mind off the coming event and her own helplessness. Mrs. Corey relaxed after a few minutes and Lexie took advantage of the lull to get her patient into a clean nightgown which she found in the bureau. She got a basin of water and a clean cloth and washed Mrs. Corey's face and hands. These little duties seemed absurd in the light of what was about to happen, but they were all that she could think of to do for her. The fire claimed her attention next. She found a hod of coals on the hearth and soon built up the fire to a respectable blaze. Once it was going well she remembered that hot water was always a prime requisite in such cases. She filled the iron kettle on the crane and left it to heat over the coals. She had done all that she could think of now. If only there was someone she could send for Wilma.

"There aren't any neighbors near, are there?" she asked at last. She heard her voice shake and wished she hadn't betrayed her nervousness.

Mrs. Corey managed to shake her head. "No nearer'n a mile. Hit's a right fur piece." She sat up with a jerk and looked at Lexie. "You hain't fixin' to go?" she asked fearfully. "*He* wouldn't keer to be askin' favors. We hain't beholden to nobody."

Lexie suppressed an impatient desire to say that asking a neighbor for help at a time like this was not likely to be looked upon as "asking a favor." She knew that Mrs. Corey was only repeating what her husband had often expressed.

Obviously it never occurred to Mrs. Corey to rebel against the strict order of life that her husband decreed. Lexie wondered whether Mrs. Corey was more afraid of him or of her coming confinement.

"Well," said Lexie hopefully, "Mr. Corey ought to be back soon. I was just wishing we could get word to the other nurse right away. If I could get one of the neighbors—"

A gasp of dismay from Mrs. Corey cut her short. "Don't leave me," she moaned. "Hit gives me comfort to have you nigh." She held out her hand with an appealing motion that went straight to Lexie's heart.

Lexie took the outstretched hand and held it tightly. "I won't leave," she promised. "I'll stay right here."

Mrs. Corey lay back on the pillow with a little sigh. She tried to smile but another spasm caught her and she groaned instead. Lexie wished desperately that she knew of something to help her. At least she might try to get Mrs. Corey to think of something else. She remembered having read that fear played an important part in childbirth pain. If she could only make Mrs. Corey forget some of her apprehension, it might help.

Lexie sat down in the chair beside the bed and took a firmer grip on Mrs. Corey's hand. As she leaned forward Lexie saw Mrs. Corey's face more clearly in the lamplight. It was drenched with perspiration. Her eyes seemed to have sunk farther into her head and Lexie saw in them the fear that was so much greater than her pain. Lexie snatched up the damp cloth and wiped Mrs. Corey's face tenderly.

"It's all right," she murmured. "Everything is going to be all right." She was far from believing what she said, but felt that she must speak calmly and with reassurance. Suddenly an inspiration came to her and she leaned closer.

"Mrs. Corey," she said softly, "tell me about your house in Carolina. What flowers did you have in the garden? What sort of flowers did you grow?"

Mrs. Corey did not seem to hear at first, then she turned her head on the pillow and looked at Lexie with slow comprehension. "Hit war purty," she said so softly that Lexie scarcely caught the words. "Hit war 'neath the mountain with plowed land nigh on all sides. Thar war a creek, a small slow creek runnin' by." She paused as though remembering.

"What about the flowers?" asked Lexie, anxious to keep her talking. "What sort of flowers did you grow?"

A little smile flickered at the corners of Mrs. Corey's lips. "The garden war the purtiest thing you ever did see. The flower what they name 'Pretty by Night' hereabouts was growin' all around and Farewell Summer come up in the fall of the y'ar." She clutched at Lexie's hand as though anxious to make her see the garden clearly. "Hit war all laid out so purty. You know them red berries? They's called 'Heart's Bustin' with Love' in these parts. They war everywhere. Oh, hit war purty, so purty and neat." She stopped and Lexie saw a tear roll down her thin cheek.

Lexie patted her hand. "You can start a garden here," she said confidently. "It's spring now. You can get seeds at the store and plant a beautiful garden. Why don't you put

it right below the porch, so you can see it from the house? You and Robby can plant it and the baby will love it when he gets bigger." She let her words come in a rush, hardly knowing what she said. The important thing was to keep talking.

A glow of interest seemed to light Mrs. Corey's eyes, then she turned her head away. "*He* wouldn't take no interest," she murmured. "Th' baby—" The mention of her child brought her back to her present distress and she gave a little moan. "Hit don't seem's though I could bear hit," she muttered. "I'm skeered, so awful—"

"It's all right," announced Lexie loudly. "I—"

A sound from the yard cut her off in mid-sentence. She listened a moment, then Robby's high clear voice reached her ears. He was chattering gaily and a deep voice murmured a reply. A minute later both Robby and his father were in the room. Lexie had jumped to her feet the instant she knew who was coming and met Mr. Corey at the door. She looked up at him, her urgent wish to make him understand the necessity of getting Wilma to the house driving away all her former dread of him.

"Mr. Corey," she said clearly, "you must go for the other nurse. Mrs. Corey needs her right away." Until this moment she had not wondered what she could say to make him go for Wilma. She knew of his aversion for asking help of any sort, his determination to stand on his own feet. Now, as she looked up into his grim face, she saw no sign of his relenting. He stared over her head toward the bed with nothing in his eyes to show that he appreciated his wife's condition.

Mrs. Corey had remained perfectly quiet since her husband's arrival. She lay looking at him as though begging him to understand, yet not daring to speak. Once she clutched at herself as another pain caught her, but she made no sound.

Suddenly Lexie could bear it no longer. She knew what Mrs. Corey was feeling and she also knew that she dared not ask her husband to go for the nurse. Her fear of him was greater than her other fear.

"Mr. Corey!" Lexie spoke loudly now. She longed to jolt him into some measure of comprehension. "Mr. Corey, you must. It is our only chance." She knew she was overstating the case, but she must make him go. Unconsciously she had reached out to pull Robby to her side as though the child might support her appeal.

Mr. Corey looked at her as though recognizing her for the first time. He stared at her, then looked at Robby. A shadow, a look that softened his entire face came into his eyes. Then, as he watched them, Lexie knew that he was remembering; he was thinking of Robby in the river and what she had done for him. With Robby beside her, she had unwittingly forced him to recollect that he owed her something, that he was "beholden" to her. Lexie held Robby closer. If this dramatic act would help, she would take full advantage of it. She dared not speak; she only hugged Robby to her and kept her eyes steadily on his face.

Then, without any word of assent, without even looking at his wife again, Mr. Corey turned and disappeared out

the door. Lexie stared at the black rectangle of the door, not daring to breath or speak until she heard the click of the gate. Then she let out her breath in a long relieved sigh. "He's gone for Wilma," she said. "Everything will be all right now."

The atmosphere in the little room lightened perceptibly now that the prospect of Wilma's arrival seemed so certain. Mrs. Corey looked immeasurably relieved and Lexie noted that she did not make a sound when the next pain gripped her. Now that some part of her fear was gone, she was prepared to face the coming event with the same Spartan fortitude that the mountain women usually showed at such times. Lexie saw her looking at Robby and realized that she was also unwilling to let the child see that she was in any way uncomfortable.

Robby stood quite still in the center of the room, staring at his mother with round-eyed wonder. Obviously the sight of his mother in bed at this time of day was utterly incomprehensible to him. Lexie wished that there was somewhere she could send the child so that he might not be needlessly frightened by the baby's arrival. But there was not even a second room in the tiny cabin where he could go. The only thing to do was to enlist his help and keep him busy.

"Robby," she said gently, putting one hand on his shoulder, "will you go out to the coal heap in the yard and get me lots more coal? Take this little pan and make a nice pile of it on the porch." She handed him a saucepan and turned him toward the door. With such a small re-

ceptacle it would take him some time to get a respectable heap of coal. By then perhaps everything would be over.

Robby took the pan wordlessly and with a last puzzled look at his mother left the room. The instant he was gone Mrs. Corey gave a gasp that sent Lexie's heart to the pit of her stomach. It was a sound so much more heartfelt than those she had allowed herself previously that Lexie knew what it must foretell. She saw Mrs. Corey hold out her hand in a mute appeal and Lexie was at her side in a moment. As she bent over her Lexie heard the familiar words that she had learned to recognize as a sign that the final stage had come.

"Oh Lordy," murmured Mrs. Corey, "Oh Lord, pin a piece of grace on me." The words were hardly more than a sigh.

Lexie clutched the thin hand on the quilt and held on with all the force of her sympathy. Wilma would be too late, she was sure of that now. Why couldn't she help? What could she do to make this baby's arrival easier?

"It's all right," she heard herself saying over and over again. The ineptness of her words struck her even as she said them. She smoothed the perspiration from Mrs. Corey's forehead with the damp cloth, murmuring words that had no meaning even to her. She saw Mrs. Corey looking at her as though begging for help. The small pathetic voice repeated the prayer she had made before.

"Oh Lord!" Her voice was stronger now, almost a cry, a demand for comfort. "Oh Lord, pin a piece of grace on me."

Lexie choked back the exclamation that nearly escaped her. There was something in this appeal that went straight to her heart. There was a note of such entreaty, yet such confidence, in those few words that she realized how much Mrs. Corey believed that they would be heard.

Lexie did not know how long it was before she understood that the baby was about to arrive. Now that the time had come when expert knowledge was most needed, she felt her inadequacy most keenly. She did what she could to ease the last few moments before the baby's birth, but she was conscious that it was only her sympathetic presence that meant anything to Mrs. Corey now. Mrs. Corey clutched at her with both hands at the last and then a tiny wailing sound told Lexie that the baby had come. Lexie reached out to take the child and at that moment she heard a noise that brought tears of relief to her eyes. It was the familiar bouncing tap of Wilma's steps on the rickety old porch.

It was like Wilma to understand without the need for words. In a moment she took command of the situation. She had spoken a few comforting words to Mrs. Corey, even as she was busy doing what was necessary for her. The baby was wrapped in a blanket and Lexie sat by the fire holding it in her arms. For several minutes Lexie was too dazed to realize that this tiny bundle was the baby that had arrived so short a time before. She looked down into the small red face in the crook of her arm and a sudden feeling that this baby almost belonged to her swept over her. She saw a patch of dark fuzz on the little round head,

a minute button that must be a nose and the soft curve of a bright red cheek.

"Why, he's beautiful," she cried involuntarily. "He's perfectly beautiful!"

Wilma laughed merrily. "It's a she, Lexie. A little girl."

Lexie held the baby closer. "All the better," she said, almost defensively.

There was a sound from the doorway and Lexie looked up to see Mr. Corey standing on the threshold. Robby was at his side, clinging to his father's hand. Lexie looked straight into the dark face of the man she had once found so forbidding. She smiled at him.

"It's a little girl," she said softly. "A little sister for Robby. Look at her, Robby."

Robby came shyly forward and stared down at the puckered baby face. "Hit's alive," he exclaimed. "Hit's movin'!" He reached out and touched the edge of the blanket with a coal-grimed finger.

"I didn't figure on a girl." It was Mr. Corey's deep voice, and Lexie caught the note of disappointment in its tone. "Girls is mighty hard to raise."

Lexie glanced quickly in Mrs. Corey's direction, hoping she had not heard. But Mrs. Corey was watching her husband and Lexie saw the shadow that crossed her face.

"Girls are wonderful!" cried Lexie. "Just think what a help she'll be in the house. Have you thought of a name for her?"

She saw Mrs. Corey shake her head wearily. Something in that motion recalled the words that Mrs. Corey had spoken so short a time before, the words of her prayer.

"Call her Grace," said Lexie. "It's a lovely name and it means something." But the last few words were only a whisper that the baby could hear.

Mr. Corey considered the suggestion. He frowned as though turning the name over in his mind, then pronounced judgment. "Hit's a right purty name," he said slowly. "Her name is Grace."

Lexie hugged the baby closer. Now more than ever it seemed to belong to her. "Wilma," she exclaimed, "let me wash her and dress her. Please!"

Wilma, who had been too busy with Mrs. Corey to pay much heed to what was taking place in the rest of the room, turned and smiled at Lexie. She seemed to take the request as quite natural. "You want to heat a little of this oil and bathe her in it," she said, gesturing to a tin of baby oil she had taken from her saddlebags. "Have you any baby clothes ready, Mrs. Corey?"

Lexie heard only the murmur of the reply, but Wilma went to the bureau and took out a small bundle of things which she handed to Lexie. The bright red of a calico baby dress caught her eye and Lexie suppressed a sigh. *Her* baby ought to be dressed in the daintiest and whitest dress imaginable, but not for worlds would she let Mrs. Corey know that the little red dress left anything to be desired.

With a square of flannel spread over her knees, Lexie gave the tiny body a bath in the warm oil. Robby stood at her side, watching every move with breathless attention. He seemed to have no curiosity as to how the baby had appeared so suddenly in the family circle, but accepted her presence with a comprehensive philosophy that found

such a phenomenon quite natural. From time to time he reached out and touched one of the little hands or feet as though to assure himself that this little creature was indeed "alive."

Lexie knew that Mr. Corey, who still remained in the doorway, was watching her, too. But he said nothing. Lexie wondered if he was sorry to see Wilma and herself there, if he resented feeling that he must be "beholden" to them. She wished she could make him understand that there was no necessity for him to feel obligated to them in any way. But short of an outright statement on the subject, she could think of nothing to say that might reassure him.

When the baby was dressed Lexie carried it over to the bed and leaned down to Mrs. Corey. "Here she is," she said softly, "here's little Grace." She placed the baby in its mother's arms.

Mrs. Corey looked at the tiny face beside her, then up at Lexie. All the fear, the pain and anxiety were gone from her eyes now. She looked completely happy, almost radiant as she reached out and took Lexie's hand in hers. "Hit's Grace sure enough," she whispered. "I'm grateful to you. I told *her* what you done fer me." She nodded toward Wilma who stood by the foot of the bed.

"But I didn't do anything!" exclaimed Lexie. "I couldn't do anything."

But Mrs. Corey squeezed her hand and smiled up at her. "Hit war not havin' to bear hit alone," she said. "You stayed by me."

Lexie remembered her first impulse to run from the cabin, to escape the situation that she had found there.

Now she was devoutly thankful that she had remained, even though she knew in her heart that the help she had been able to give had been of little practical value. But if she had sustained Mrs. Corey's morale, it meant that she had not been entirely useless.

Wilma was repacking her saddlebags as Lexie said good-bye to Mrs. Corey and little Grace. "I'll come to see you tomorrow," said Lexie. Then she leaned closer and whispered, "I'm going to bring you some flower seeds from the store. They'll be a present for Grace."

Mrs. Corey glanced quickly toward her husband, then nodded at Lexie. "I'd be proud to have them," she murmured. "Hit do seem worth livin' now the baby's safe." She looked down at the little bundle in her arms and Lexie knew that Mrs. Corey had forgotten her fears of the recent past and that all her heart and thought were directed to the child at her side.

Lexie moved quietly toward the door and joined Wilma on the porch. She looked back into the room with its glow of firelight on the walls, the warmth and comfort that lent beauty to the shabby interior. Robby stood by the bed with his mother's hand in his, watching his baby sister with the same wondering look on his solemn little face. Lexie carried that picture in her memory for many months to come.

Mr. Corey came out to the gate with them and watched them as they mounted their horses. He had listened wordlessly as Wilma gave him directions for caring for his wife and child, never for a moment showing that he in any way appreciated what either of the girls had done for his family.

But when they were in the saddle he stepped forward and gave the stiff little bow that he had once given Lexie.

"I thank ye," he said formally. "I thank ye kindly."

Lexie understood the effort that went into those few words and could only murmur a reply. But Wilma took his gratitude more calmly. She thanked him with her usual easy friendliness and followed Lexie down the stony little path that led to the trail.

It was dark now, but a blaze of stars lighted the way sufficiently for the horses to see the path. A cool breeze blew in from the river, bringing with it the scent of the flowering trees on the mountainsides. Lexie had no wish to talk; she let Cham find his way of his own accord and sat motionless in the saddle, feeling the peace and beauty of the night. She knew that in one way she had accomplished something for Mrs. Corey, but a vague, nagging sense of her own inadequacy in a moment of stress haunted her thoughts.

"I wish I'd really been able to help her," she said at last. "I felt so—so useless."

But Wilma's sturdy common sense would not allow Lexie the luxury of such repinings. "You did what you could and you stuck by her. That's what she needed. She told me how you helped her. It was a good job, Lexie, and you needn't feel ashamed of it." Wilma spoke briskly and her words had the effect of bringing Lexie down to earth once more. A little glow at Wilma's praise warmed her and her spirits rose.

"Well, I'm glad it's over," she said in a more normal voice. "Now maybe Mr. Corey will see some worth in the F.N.S."

Wilma laughed: "He's an independent spirit if ever there was one, but he'll do anything for his family, I'm sure of that. There's the center. Looks as though Eleanor were waiting up for us."

It was after ten by the time the horses were settled for the night, the chickens chased out of the feed room, and the Jersey cow secured in her stall. It was only as she walked up the steps to the house that Lexie realized how tired she was. Both physically and emotionally she felt exhausted by her experiences of the last few hours. The only thing that seemed worth looking forward to was bed. But Lexie soon discovered that even this simple wish was to be denied her for a little time at least. Eleanor was waiting for them in the living room. She had made a pot of cocoa and was obviously prepared for a cozy session of conversation before bed.

"I made Timmy go to bed early," announced Eleanor. "She still needs all the rest she can get." She spoke authoritatively as though Timmy were a patient in her charge. Lexie wondered, as she sank down on a cushion by the hearthstone, if Timmy resented Eleanor's dictation as she would if it were directed to her. She leaned her head against the side of the fireplace, listening as Wilma told of the Corey baby's arrival. The words seemed to come from far away; it was almost as though Wilma were talking about another incident and other people.

It was only when she caught Wilma's last words that she heard distinctly. ". . . and Lexie did a fine job. Mrs. Corey certainly seemed to think so." Wilma nodded in Lexie's direction and got to her feet. "Bed for me. It's a

long day tomorrow. Good night." With a bright nod and smile, Wilma left them, moving quickly up the stairs with her short bounding steps.

For several seconds Lexie sat in an uncomfortable silence, staring into the fire. She knew Eleanor was watching her and she wondered uneasily what she might say. It seemed rude to jump up and follow Wilma immediately; it might betray her desire to avoid Eleanor.

"Lexie." Eleanor's voice was as cool and detached as ever, but Lexie caught an odd note of appeal in its tone.

She looked at her and saw that Eleanor was fingering the spoon that lay in her saucer. Lexie's heart sank. What was coming now?

"Lexie," said Eleanor more firmly. "I want to tell you that I think you've done a fine job here in the Service. I—" She hesitated for a moment. "Mark told me a good deal about you and I understand what it's meant to you to come here."

Lexie's reaction to this extraordinary statement was one of almost complete confusion of mind. She was flattered by Eleanor's commendation, for she knew that the uncompromising Eleanor would never make such a compliment unless she meant it. On the other hand, she was annoyed to think that Mark had discussed her with Eleanor. Her conflicting emotions kept her silent. There seemed to be nothing to say that would be adequate to the occasion. She sat staring into the fire and wishing she could escape from the room without seeming ungracious.

"Mark is a fine person," announced Eleanor, after a

short silence. "He has a real future ahead of him in his profession."

Lexie managed to nod. Eleanor sounded exactly like Aunt Em, even to the definite tone of her voice. She wondered whether Eleanor expected an answer to this last remark and stole a look at her out of the corner of her eyes. Eleanor was not looking at her; she, too, was staring into the fire and there was an odd controlled tightness in her expression. It was as though she were struggling to find words for what she felt compelled to say.

"I have had several letters from him since I've been here," said Eleanor, speaking in a rush. "I think I understand him better now than I did when I was in Boston. He—" But Eleanor did not finish. She stood up with a sudden decisive movement and put her cup and saucer down on the table with a little bang.

Lexie rose to her feet and stood facing Eleanor. She had known that Eleanor and Mark wrote to each other. Why was Eleanor telling her this fact now? What did it mean? Suddenly Lexie wished she knew what was going on behind the calm blue eyes that met hers across the hearth. Eleanor was once more as cool and self-possessed as she always was. Any emotion that she had betrayed in the last few minutes was gone now.

"Well," said Eleanor briskly, "I must get to bed. You'll be going back to Wendover soon, I imagine. I leave for the hospital tomorrow. We may not see much of each other in the next two weeks before you leave. It's been nice knowing you." Eleanor held out her hand.

Lexie took it with an impulsive motion. For the first time an idea that she had missed something in not trying to know Eleanor better crossed her mind. It was too late now and Lexie felt a fleeting regret. "Good-bye," she said. "I—I'm sorry you won't be at Wendover again." It seemed a lame remark, but Lexie could not think of anything to express her feeling any better.

Eleanor nodded and turned toward the stairs. She stopped with one hand on the banister and looked back at Lexie. "When you get to Boston," she said distinctly, "give my—er—regards to Mark." She disappeared up the stairs.

Lexie stared after her as a light of understanding burst upon her. She knew now what Eleanor had been trying to say. Somehow she realized that Eleanor was giving up all thought of Mark, that she was leaving Lexie in full possession of the field. At the same time another thought struck Lexie. Eleanor might give up Mark, but was Mark prepared to forget Eleanor?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LEXIE looked out at the wide stretch of fields and fences that flowed past the train window like a moving stage set. It was the same Kentucky landscape she had seen two months before, though vastly different in its full bloom of summer greenery. Two months! It was incredible. No one could pack so much experience and life and emotion into such a short span of time. Lexie leaned on the window sill and watched the red-stained clouds of the evening sky. It would be dark soon, too dark to see anything more of the countryside.

The thought of the coming darkness gave impetus to Lexie's next act. She took a bulky notebook from her suitcase and spread it open on her knees. Glancing at the last entry, she sighed. "Confluence, April 14th," she read. More than two weeks ago, and she hadn't written a word since that time. If she wanted to remember, to keep the events of her life at Wendover clearly in mind, she must put them down now. She braced her feet firmly on the ledge under the window and steadied her arm on the win-

dow sill. She must bring her diary up to date before she reached home. She had promised Mark to keep an account of her experiences. It would be hard to put herself back in time, but it must be done while everything was fresh in her mind.

April 15 to 30—

Wendover

Got back here today, and how I hated to leave Confluence. But I can't complain as I was there over two weeks and no other courier has had such luck. Never thought when I packed those few shirts and things in my saddlebags I'd be gone so long. I had a time keeping clean, but by turning myself into a laundress every few days I managed.

Word came last night for me to ride back to Wendover today by way of Dry Hill. River's way down now, so no trouble at all. Went to see Mrs. Corey and my little Grace for the last time before I left. She's a dear baby, getting fat already, and I'm sure she smiled at me, but Wilma says it was probably gas. Bet it wasn't. The flower seeds I gave Mrs. Corey were under her pillow—all the bright-colored little packages. She told me her husband had promised to plow up the yard so she could plant them when she's strong enough. You can see she's a different person just because she can think about those flowers. The house looked better already. I guess Mr. Corey did a lot of cleaning up—he even bought some real wallpaper—bright pink flowers—and it cheers up the place enormously. I hated to say good-by to them. Somehow I

feel I won't see them again and I got so fond of them, even Mr. Corey. He actually got so he'd talk to me, and little Robby turned into a regular chatterbox. Maybe I will see them again. I can't bear to think I'll never see Confluence again and, if you want something hard enough, maybe you'll get it.

Wilma honestly seemed to hate to see me go. She's so efficient and busy all the time she doesn't say much about what she feels, but I know she thought I'd been a help while I was there. I practically burst into tears saying good-by to the Confluence horses and the cow and chickens and dogs and—oh, everything there. I guess I rode off in a haze of tears, because I couldn't see much until I got way down the road. Luckily Cham, the old dear, knows his way and he knows me by now, too, and he plodded along until I could collect myself. The trip was "entirely uneventful," to coin a phrase. After the trails and creeks around Confluence that long, dusty, twisty road is pretty dull. Didn't stop at the hospital in Hyden, but kept right on to Wendover. No matter what you think about Confluence, Wendover looks wonderful, too, when you see it through the trees from the lower road. Perfectly amazing how many new flowers there are in the garden below the Big House. Everyone on the lookout for the first rose—Mrs. Breckinridge has kept track of the first one in her garden for years and it's always a sort of jollification when it comes.

Debbie was watching for me and it was a treat to hear that blurry voice of hers "hollerin'" at me from

the tackroom when I rode up to the barn. She had just come back from Beech Fork where she'd taken a relief horse. Liz had gone off the day before to take a little girl from the Hurricane Creek area to the Children's Hospital in Cincinnati. The hospital there takes any one child the F.N.S. sends, and the railroad lets the hospital cases travel on a pass—typical of the way people all over the state think of the Service. They'll do so much to help us. Couldn't help thinking how Liz must hate to leave here even for a day or so; she never looks quite happy unless she's fussing with the horses. I can't imagine her dressed up in "city clothes."

Of course Debbie never stopped talking until about midnight that night. I caught up on all the news and I'm sure she made it six times as exciting as it would have been if I'd been here to see it all. She has such a wonderful gift for exaggeration and everything is a crisis where she's "just like to die" or she's "just thrilled to death." I'm going to miss Debbie awfully when she leaves. She goes a week before I do and I'm sure half the color will go out of the place when she isn't here.

I thought when I began to catch up with this diary that I'd remember everything in an "orderly fashion," as Aunt Em loves to say. But now I think of everything as all run together somehow. I stayed at Wendover, except for day trips, of course, all the rest of my time there. Sometimes it seems as though I spent most of the time grooming horses and cleaning

tack. There were eight horses in the Wendover stable those two weeks and the amount of dirt they could collect on themselves and their gear is past description. Debbie, Liz, and I, either two or three of us or one at a time, were busy with them most of every day. Then we had a barrage of guests; social service people who came to see the way the F.N.S. is run, a couple of doctors from India, a nurse from China, friends of Mrs. Breckinridge, and even a bishop. They all wanted to see everything, of course, and we took them on short trips to see near-by centers or jeeped them in to the Hospital to inspect that, got them here and there in time for meals and tea, and finally loaded them on buses for home. They were all fascinating people and so interested in all we had to show them. But they kept us busy with all the routine work there is to do, too.

It rained for almost a full week just after I got back, and of course there was a "tide" in the river—just to keep things lively. Went with Abby one night in a pouring rain to deliver a baby up Muncie. We crossed the river in a flat-bottomed rowboat in the pitch dark and rode a mule for three miles after that to the house. Abby took it all as a matter of course, but I was certainly "thrilled to death" more than once before we got home again.

In that rainy week I also spent a good deal of time helping out in the office. There were about five thousand—or so it seemed—invitations to the annual

meeting of the F.N.S. in Louisville to get out. I addressed cards until I had writer's cramp. Everybody pitched in and we got them off in time.

Debbie left the end of that rainy week. I hated to see her go just as much as I knew I would. What a scurry we had getting her ready. Of course she couldn't find any of her things. Our room, which looks as though a tornado had struck it anyway, was even worse when we were trying to pack up Debbie. She lost two pairs of jodhpurs, a pair of rubber boots, all her woolen socks, and at the last minute couldn't even find her pocketbook. I finally rescued it from underneath her bed, where I guess it had been the whole time she was at Wendover. Poor Miss Freeman was in despair. She's such a neat soul and our room was the blight of her life. She'd just close her eyes every time she walked by in the hall. It took the whole Garden House to get Debbie off and she was "just fit to die" every minute. I couldn't believe she was the same person when she was at last ready to go. She looked more than ever like a tiny china doll in the prettiest suit I ever saw and a hat that must have been a Daché model originally, except that Liz's dog, Prudy, had eaten the flowers off one side of it. We finally got everything crammed into her suitcase and Liz drove her in to Hyden to catch the bus for Hazard. Her last words to me were a frantic yelp to let me know that she'd forgotten her fountain pen and would I "be a lamb" and send it on to her. Will, if I can find it, which I doubt. The place seemed empty without her. We promised

to write and I can't believe I won't see her again. Maybe we'll both come back here someday.

The new courier didn't arrive until after I left, so Liz and I were doubly busy. Liz is a wonderful girl—not as easy to know as Debbie, but friendly just the same. She taught me so much about horses, how to treat them when they're sick and everything, that I really think I learned a lot. She loves anything to do with animals and you can't help catching her enthusiasm. When I think I was even scared to groom a horse when I first came here I can't believe it.

The last week whizzed by. What with the routine work at Wendover, a jaunt to Red Bird in the jeep to take some medicines, exercising the horses, health and delivery calls with Abby, and all the thousand and one messages I carried hither and yon, it has all blurred together into a time of frantic bustle. But I loved every minute of it—that's my strongest impression. I wish I could put into one word or even a thousand words all that I think of Wendover and the F.N.S. in general. I think of myself as I was when I came there just two months ago and feel I don't recognize that Lexie Littleton. Yet, I can't put my finger on what has changed. I just don't feel the same person, that's all, and it's being there that's done it. Maybe no one can say how he or she changes. I know I feel more sure of myself and in a better way than I used to. There are so many things I can do now that I couldn't then, and I don't mean obvious things like grooming a horse, treating a saddle sore, or lugging a fifty-pound bag of

feed in and out of a jeep. Those things are everyday.

Now as I look back on it all I like to think of so many things—the firelight in the living room of the Big House at tea time; listening to Mrs. Breckinridge talk while we drink tea—and there’s nothing she can’t talk well about; the moonlight on the Middle Fork when we walked from the Big House to the Garden House at night, with all the lights shining from the Cabin and the Upper and Lower Shelf; riding up the creek trails with the sun or rain on the rocks and clearings and all the little houses on the hills; the people who live in those houses whom I know and who call out “Howdy” as I ride by; the sound of the river at night when I’m in bed, rushing along when everything else is so utterly quiet. It’s all a part of Wendover with its people and its animals, and I love it all.

The last day came all too soon. It hardly seems possible it was only yesterday. I said good-bye to Mrs. Breckinridge up in her room after breakfast. Her windows look right out over the river and the mountains beyond and she can see the seasons change on the hills. She was so nice to me, and told me how much I’d helped, and hoped I’d come back. Then I said good-bye to everyone in the office, the kitchen help and anyone I could see. I’d already packed and returned all the stuff I’d borrowed from grab and tried to make the room look decent for the new couriers—two of them—who came the day I left. Just as I was trying to get my skirt zipped up—I’ve gained ten

pounds since I've been here and I don't fancy my figure as much as I used to— Liz yelled up to me that the mail had just come in and—wonder of wonders—my duffle bag with all the stuff I sent months ago from home had arrived! We laughed until I felt weak. I think I ought to donate it all to the express company as a prize of some sort. I finally just redirected it to Boston again and probably I'll see it next fall sometime.

Liz took me in to Hyden to catch the 9:30 bus from there to Manchester. I couldn't see much as I left. I remember people calling "Come back, come back," and Prudy yelping because she was left behind and, just before I got into the jeep, I remembered to give Cham a whole handful of candy and a good hug goodbye. If I wrote that I was "sorry to leave" it would be such an understatement that it just wouldn't be true. I *will* "come back" if it's the last thing I ever do. Most of all I remember my last glimpse of the Big House. I looked up at the house as we jolted over the lower road. All the casement windows were open and the whole front of the house was flooded with sun. The open windows made it seem as though the house were holding out its arms to me, begging me to come back. That was when I really couldn't see any more.

Liz talked about my coming back on the way in. She said next time I come I could be a senior courier instead of a mere junior, and she really sounded as though she wanted me back. It set me up a lot to have Liz say that. She's such a stickler for perfection as far

as the animals are concerned that I was proud to have her think I had done a good job.

I just caught the bus with seconds to spare, so I didn't have time to say good-bye to anyone at the hospital. Liz told me that Eleanor sent a message to say good-bye to me and also something about "Don't forget." I wonder what she meant. Perhaps it means not to forget to give Mark her regards. I'll do it—if I get a chance.

Now that I'm nearing home I think of him so much. I can write that, because if things don't go as I hope with him, then he'll never see this diary anyway. If they do, I want to tell you, Mark—and this is just for you—that all I've written here about "changing" hasn't meant that I've changed in one thing. I still feel about you just as I always have and nothing and no one can change that. There, I've written it and I don't care if you see it, because you won't unless I get my wish. I have your letter here with me. I'm sorry you're on hospital duty and can't meet this train tomorrow morning. But you ask me to meet you in the afternoon for the concert at Symphony Hall. I'll be there waiting. Until I see your face I won't know, I won't know anything at all about what this two months has done to me or to us.

Lexie paused at the curbing and let the traffic flow past her on Massachusetts Avenue. Across the street she could see the crowd of people on the steps of Symphony Hall. They seemed almost reluctant to move on inside; a warm

May Day sun lighted the bright spring dresses of the women and even seemed to give a polish and glow to the drab street itself. A truck rumbled past Lexie and the driver leaned out to stare at her with frank admiration. Lexie looked up at him and smiled gaily. It was impossible not to smile at everyone on such a day.

Suddenly she felt that she was re-living something that she had known before. Once a long time ago she had stood on this corner; a truck had gone past her and the driver had leaned out to speak to her. Lexie frowned in an effort at concentration and it seemed as though the memory of that moment in the past held a sense of chill. She shivered involuntarily and a little cloud settled over her spirit.

It wasn't until she crossed the street and joined the throng on the steps that she remembered. It was in January, only a few months ago, that that other incident had taken place. Now, as she recalled it in detail, it seemed as though it must have happened to another person in another age. It couldn't be the same Lexie Littleton who had felt as she had then, so full of doubt, resentment, and insecurity. Not that all her doubts were resolved by any means, but the insecurity was gone and that unhappy sense of animosity toward all the world. Lexie drew a long breath and shut the recollection of that past distress out of her mind. It was spring now; the tulips were out in the Public Gardens and the Swan Boats were on the little lake. She had seen them on her way to the Hall. In another few minutes she would see Mark. There must be nothing to interfere with the blissful awareness of that meeting.

Lexie curled her fingers into the palms of her hands and wished her heart would stop beating so rapidly. It quite destroyed her composure. Of course it was all right to let Mark realize that she was glad to see him, but it would never do to have him think that she was nervous. But how could any girl, if she felt as she did about Mark and at the same time so uncertain of his feeling toward her, remain calm and collected in such a critical moment? Lexie didn't know and it was too late now to find out.

She must push her way to the steps leading up to the inner doors so that Mark could see her when he came in. He might be late, but she could wait. It was rather difficult to preserve the perfect appearance of her new spring print dress in such a press of people. She had bought the dress that morning shortly after getting off the train, and the gay little chip of a red hat, too. They were for Mark's benefit; she wondered if he would notice them. If he still cared, he would. She reached the steps as a loud and familiar voice hailed her.

"Alexandra! My dear child, how are you?" The voice could belong only to one person and Lexie turned to see Aunt Em waving at her from the crowd below. Aunt Em still wore her red turban, her hair still strayed about her neck, but her gray cloak was changed to a loose wrapper-like silk garment that had greeted many a Boston spring. She swept toward Lexie with her hands out, her great voice making it clear to anyone in the lobby that she was greeting a long-unseen friend.

"My dear, I heard you were home. Let me look at you. Did you have a good time? No, don't tell me. I can see for

myself." Aunt Em was right before her now and studying Lexie with a critical glare that seemed to look straight through her.

Suddenly Lexie laughed. How could she have ever felt ashamed of Aunt Em? Wasn't it plain to the meanest intelligence that Aunt Em was good from the top of her ridiculous turban to the soles of her sturdy boots? Lexie threw her arms about Aunt Em's plump shoulders and hugged her.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said. "Aunt Em, you're responsible, you know. You made me go to Wendover, in a way." *You and somebody else*, she added to herself.

"Here, here, child!" Aunt Em resettled her turban with a violent motion that sent several new locks of hair to join those on her neck. She sniffed and tried to look as though Lexie's affectionate gesture had not touched her. Then she glanced sharply at her niece. "It did it, I'm satisfied," she announced mysteriously. She patted Lexie's arm. "I told Mark to be on time. Where is he?" she demanded.

"You told him!" exclaimed Lexie in surprise. "Why what—?"

"I gave him my tickets," replied Aunt Em with the air of one who has engineered a successful coup. "Fortunately Dr. Weaver had an attack of gastritis this morning and Marion Weaver let me take his ticket or I wouldn't be here. Such a stroke of luck for me. I hate to miss Dr. Kousivitsky when he's playing one of these modern things. I can tell him exactly what I think of it when I see him and it's not much, I can tell you." Aunt Em was moving away and her last words reached Lexie from a distance. Not that

they were in any way indistinct; they were clear to Lexie and almost anyone who cared to hear them.

"I'll see you later," called Lexie, raising her voice. A few months ago she wouldn't have dreamed of shouting at Aunt Em like that. But what did it matter after all?

"I'll be at the house for dinner tonight." The announcement boomed back at her from the Hall, for Aunt Em had disappeared from sight.

Lexie smiled as she leaned back against the doorjamb to wait. Only a few stragglers were left in the lobby now. Some of them were people she knew and Lexie smiled and nodded at them. It was fun to see everyone, but she hoped no one would stop to talk right now. She wanted to be alone when Mark came; she wanted to be in full possession of her wits and composure. It would be a moment of crisis for her, she knew. Her first glimpse of him would tell her what he felt for her; whether he was the rather distant Mark she had said good-bye to in March or the Mark she had known when he first asked her to marry him.

She took a deep breath to steady herself and rested her head against the half-open door beside her. The doors would be shut in a few minutes; the concert was about to begin. She could hear the distant scrape and discord of the tuning instruments now. Everyone had gone in; she was alone in the lobby. Mark was late, quite late. Would he have asked her to the concert if Aunt Em had not given him the tickets? Lexie could imagine that Aunt Em had bullied him into it. It was her subtle way of "bringing them together." Lexie knew that Aunt Em felt she had been extremely clever in her arrangement with the tickets.

But it took some of the anticipation out of their meeting. It was Aunt Em who had been responsible for it. Lexie shut her eyes; she almost wished she had not come.

"Lexie." A hand rested on her arm, a large hand with strong fingers that held her with a well-remembered firmness. "Lexie, I'm here. I'm sorry to be late."

For a split second Lexie didn't want to open her eyes. She knew that Mark stood beside her. His touch, the sound of his voice, she had known in her thoughts every day of the past weeks. They had not changed. They were just as she remembered them. She looked at Mark then. He stood on a lower step and his face was on a level with hers. She said nothing, she did not smile at him, she only looked straight into the clear eyes that met hers. She would know when she saw his eyes what her answer would be. She could look behind them and she would know.

Mark met her searching look steadily and Lexie realized the he, too, was looking for something within her that would answer a question for him. Neither of them spoke, and Lexie never knew who it was that made the first involuntary motion that broke the spell. All she knew was that Mark's arms were around her and that he was holding her so tightly that she couldn't breathe. But she didn't want to breathe; she didn't want to move. She had her answer and it didn't matter what happened now.

A voice from behind them made them both jump. "Excuse it, please," said an elderly usher, who peered out from the doorway. "The doors must be shut. Are you coming in?"

Lexie looked at Mark, but she couldn't trust her voice.

She only smiled. It was Mark who shook his head and replied, "Not now, thanks."

The usher shrugged his shoulders as though resigned to the whims of humanity and the door closed behind him. They were alone in the lobby; it was quiet now, except for the distant hum of the traffic outside and the blurred sound of the music within.

"Sit down on the steps," said Mark. He took her hand and pulled her down beside him. "You didn't want to go in right now, did you?"

"No." It was the first word Lexie had spoken to Mark and it sounded very small and bare. There was so much to say, but where could she begin? "Aunt Em says it's modern music. She doesn't like it." Why was she talking about Aunt Em? she wondered uneasily.

Mark laughed. She caught a note of uncertainty in his voice and wondered suddenly if he were as nervous as she. The thought gave her courage and she looked up at him.

"Mark, I—"

"Lexie, you—"

They both laughed and the tension was broken. Suddenly Lexie felt that she could say anything to Mark and that he would understand.

"You begin," she said.

"Right where we left off?" Mark took her hand in his and held it, as though he never wanted to let it go.

Lexie made a little face at him. "Before that. I don't think I liked where we left off. Did you get all my letters? I kept the diary; you can see it if you want." Lexie was

talking quickly now. There was one shadow, one question between them and she dreaded the first mention of it. She knew it must come; indeed, the subject of Eleanor Payne must be discussed before all was quite right between them.

"You write wonderful letters, Lexie." Mark spoke as though he were thinking of something else. He took a deep breath. "Eleanor wrote a lot about the life down there and about you, too," he added, looking straight at Lexie.

Lexie could not meet his eyes. Mark had spoken that name and there was no avoiding it now. Even though she knew in her heart that Mark loved her as she wanted him to, she could not get over a nagging suspicion that Eleanor Payne also meant something to him. Mark was too honest, too straight-forward, to try to hide anything from her. He would tell her what Eleanor had been to him or even what he might still feel for her. She had only to wait. She tried to pull her hand away, but Mark only held it tighter.

"No, don't go away," he said. "I want to tell you something about—" He hesitated and, glancing at him, Lexie saw his lips tighten. She knew it was hard for him to explain, but Lexie would not have been human if she had tried to make it easier for him. She waited with a sense of mingled dread and curiosity that was almost unbearable.

"I think you know that I admired Eleanor, that I still admire her," he went on, speaking with an obvious effort. "She's an amazing girl in many ways. I like her forthrightness, her ability to stand on her own feet, and her courage.

She had no one to help her get where she is, you know. She did it all on her own."

Lexie, who felt that each of the attributes that Mark ascribed to Eleanor was in direct opposition to any quality of her own, found it impossible to reply. Was Mark trying to tell her that he loved Eleanor? Had his first greeting to her been merely an expression of affection, that brotherly regard which she had noted in his attitude before she went to Wendover? Had she been deceived after all? Lexie could not have spoken if her life depended on it. She stared at the tips of her shoes, and her eyes were glazed with tears.

Mark bent forward and looked into her face. "Here!" He sounded alarmed. "What's the matter? I'm trying to explain. It's all over, don't you understand? She doesn't love me any more than I do her; she never did, really, and I only thought I did for a while. Good Lord, why do I have to explain anything? Don't you *know*?"

Mark spoke in such an exasperated tone that Lexie could not help laughing. Her overwhelming relief was almost too strong for composure and she knew she sounded almost hysterical. It was just like Mark, just like any man, she told herself, to cause her months of harrowing worry and then expect her to understand all the reasons for it in a single moment.

An imp of mischief took possession of her. Mark should not get off so easily. She would make him explain, if only to bury this question between them forever.

"Understand?" She looked at him in pretended surprise. "Not exactly. Tell me."

Mark groaned and rested his forehead on his free hand. "I guess I owe it to you and—and to Eleanor, too," he muttered resignedly. "It was just that she was so different from—from—"

"From me?" said Lexie helpfully.

Mark looked at her and grinned. "Who else? I know you're doing this to me on purpose, but go ahead. I deserve it. Eleanor's still a swell girl, but, from her letters, I got a feeling that she was pretty—well, *overwhelming* is the only word I can think of. She always referred to you as my "little friend" for one thing."

Lexie straightened up indignantly. She remembered the first time she had seen Eleanor and how she had spoken of her as "Mark's little friend." The memory still rankled. "Go on," she said grimly.

"Well, it got under my skin a bit. Eleanor's so sure of herself. I began to feel that she thought she owned me. She told me a good deal about you and spoke as though she thought you'd "make out all right," but I got the impression that she knew she was in there pitching from the word go. She's efficient, you know. There's really very little she can't do."

"Just like a Bendix," Lexie muttered resentfully, but Mark did not hear. He was struggling to make his position clear, and she would not help him.

"She didn't need me," he announced after a minute. "She likes it down there. I know that. She'll be perfectly happy."

Lexie glanced at him. By inference she gathered that Mark felt she needed him. Well, it was true. It was not an

arguable point. Suddenly she remembered the Sunday when she had seen Eleanor after chapel with Mark's letter in her lap. Had it been that letter that had told Eleanor something which made her think that Mark was slipping away from her?

"Did you ever write and tell her all this?" she demanded.

"Something like that, I guess." Mark looked so uncomfortable that Lexie relented somewhat.

"She got the point all right," she said obscurely. "Now," she added lightly, "I suppose you're going to tell me that my letters showed what a weak, helpless woman I am and that I couldn't get along without you. That's true enough," she murmured under her breath.

But Mark refused to laugh with her. "On the contrary, you're not weak and helpless, as you say, and your letters are what proved it. You can get sore if you want, but your first letters told a lot you never meant they should. You were scared and you made a lot of mistakes that you wouldn't admit. But you stuck with it and that's what counts."

Lexie felt an urge to justify those first letters, but had the sense to quell the impulse. What Mark said was true, but she hadn't known that he could read between the lines so cleverly.

"Then they began to change," said Mark. "You didn't say so much about yourself, and in the end you never told me anything about saving that kid from the river. I knew then that—"

"Little Robby!" Lexie stared at him. "How did you find out?"

"Eleanor wrote me. You see, she's not as bad as I know you think she is. She's pretty swell."

Lexie could only nod her agreement. If Eleanor had written Mark about Robby, knowing that she had lost Mark to her, then all that Mark said of her was true. Eleanor might be almost superhumanly efficient, somewhat overbearing and sure of herself, yet she was capable of an act as generous and disinterested as this. Lexie's heart warmed to her.

"I didn't know," she said in a very small voice. "I wish—I wish I had known that before I left. She wanted me to give you her regards," she added suddenly.

Mark did not answer for a moment. "Look here," he said at last. "Let's forget Eleanor. She's happy and so are we, I hope. Aren't we? Lexie, please, don't think about her any more. We're here and she's there. You know, I don't think I ever stopped loving you. I can't talk about it without sounding as though I were preaching, and heaven forbid I do that. You're the same Lexie and just the way I want you."

Lexie shook her head. "Not the same," she said quietly. "I'm glad I'm not. I wouldn't have missed the Frontier Nursing Service for worlds. Anything I did down there was nothing to what it did for me. There's so much I never knew before—about people, and how wonderful they are. You don't have time to think about yourself at a place like Wendover; you just go out and do things because they have to be done. Everybody works together and nobody gets special credit. One little courier like me only counts for what she can do for the Service. Oh, I can't explain at

all, but I know what I feel about it. I want to go again some day, and I will if I possibly can."

Mark did not reply, but he pressed Lexie's hand closer. She looked at him and knew that he realized what she was trying to say. There was no cloud between them now, no question of doubt or distrust. She wanted to tell him that, to say that she forgave him his feeling for Eleanor Payne and even that she understood it. But it was hard to find the words and, as she sat there on the steps with Mark holding her hand in his, she heard a loud and swelling burst of music from within the Hall. It sounded triumphant and almost challenging and it echoed the feeling in her heart. Lexie looked at Mark and smiled. It was not always necessary to say in words what you wanted the person you loved to know.

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